SIX COMPLETE NOVELS IN THIS ISSUE!

15¢

STAR WESTERN

A POPULAR PUBLICATION

THE BIG 144 PAGE MAGAZINE

DEACON BOTTLE'S WHISKEY REBELLION

by ROBERT E. MAHAFFAY

TOM ROAN
WILLIAM R. COX
DEE LINFORD
AND OTHERS!

A VIVID NOVEL OF THE OKLAHOMA TERRITORY

DEATH BUYS A TRAIL HERD

by WALT COBURN

6 COMPLETE NOVELS
APR.
STAR WESTERN
15¢
144 PAGES

10¢ A DAY— buys a Diamond or Famous Watch

On Our NEW SAVINGS BOOK PLAN

Yes — only 10c a day on my Savings Book Plan will buy your choice of these Diamonds or Watches. It's simple — here's how you go about it . . .

WHAT YOU DO:

Send coupon below with a dollar bill and a brief note telling me who you are, your occupation, and a few other facts about yourself. Indicate the watch or diamond you want on coupon, giving number and price.

WHAT I'LL DO:

I'll open an account for you on my SAVINGS BOOK PLAN, send the watch or diamond you want for approval and

10-DAY TRIAL

If satisfied, you pay 10 monthly payments. If you are not satisfied after wearing the watch or ring for 10 days, send it back and I'll return your dollar on our

MONEY-BACK GUARANTEE

A Savings Book will be sent to you to help you save your dime each day. YOU PAY MONTHLY by money order or check. Try this easy, convenient method that has helped thousands to own fine diamonds and watches without burden on the pocketbook or savings. All prices include Federal Tax.

FREE TO ADULTS

A postcard brings my complete 48-page catalogue and full details on my SAVINGS BOOK PLAN. No Obligation.

$27.50

A7 — Brilliant Cut Diamond Engagement Ring. 14K yellow gold.

$1 deposit $2.85 a month

both $33

A84—Bridal Set. 8 Brilliant Cut Diamonds. 14K yellow gold.

$1 deposit $3.20 a month

$35.75

D122—Man's Twin Ring. Diamond and simulated blue sapphire. 14K yellow gold. $1 deposit $3.48 mo.

$22

I157—Man's Initial Ring. Diamond; 2 initials on black onyx. 14K yellow gold.

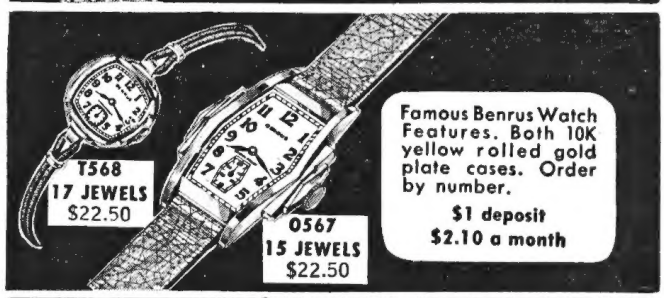
$1 deposit $2.10 a month

P122—Ladies' 10K coral rolled gold plate KENT Watch. 7 jewels. Guaranteed. Extra link bracelet.

$1 deposit $1.83 a month

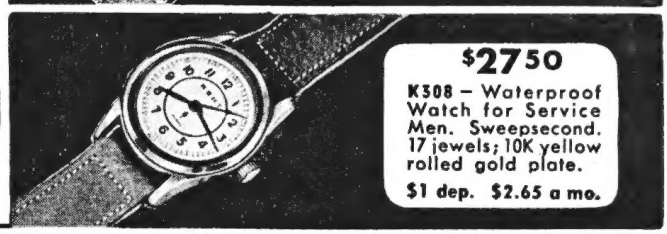
Bulova Watch Features for Men and Women. Both 10K yellow rolled gold plate case. Order by number.

$1 deposit
$3.28 a month



Famous Benrus Watch Features. Both 10K yellow rolled gold plate cases. Order by number.

$1 deposit
$2.10 a month



$27.50

K308 — Waterproof Watch for Service Men. Sweepsecond. 17 jewels; 10K yellow rolled gold plate.

$1 dep. $2.65 a mo.

JIM FEENEY
L. W. Sweet, 1670 Broadway, (Dept. 12-D)
New York, N. Y.

Enclosed find $1 deposit. Send me No._____ Price $_____. I agree to pay the balance in 10 equal monthly payments, otherwise I'll return selection and you will refund my dollar.

NAME_____

ADDRESS_____

CITY_____ STATE_____

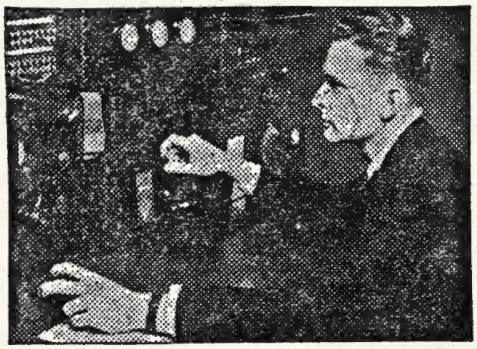
L.W. Sweet

MAIL ORDER DIVISION OF FINLAY STRAUS, Inc.

Dept. 12-D 1670 BROADWAY, NEW YORK

Get Into RADIO Quick!

RADIO TECHNICIANS in Demand
More Needed Now Than Ever Before



RADIO TECHNICIANS, OPERATORS hold good jobs in the 882 Broadcasting Stations in the U.S. with average pay among the country's best paid industries. Aviation, Police, Commercial, Marine, Government Radio, forging ahead even during the War, employ Radio Technicians and Operators. Soldiers, Sailors, Marines with Radio training win extra rank, pay, are ready for good jobs after their military service is over. I train you to be ready when Television opens jobs in the future. Mail the Coupon for complete details.

REPAIRING, SERVICING, home and auto Radio sets (there are now 50,197,000 in use) gives good jobs to thousands, offers more opportunities now than ever. Loudspeaker Systems are another source of profit for Radio Technicians. Many Radio Technicians operate their own spare time or full time Radio business, servicing, repairing, selling Radio sets. Get the facts. Mail the coupon.

Learn At Home To Make $30 $40 $50 a Week

MAIL THE COUPON! Find out about the many opportunities Radio offers you to make more money quickly and to prepare yourself for a good-pay job after the War. Whether you're eligible for military service or exempt, you should get my 64-page Book, "Rich Rewards in Radio." It's FREE. It tells about Radio's present and future opportunities and how I train beginners at home in spare time to be Radio Technicians and Operators; how I teach operating principles of Army, Navy, Civilian Defense Radio equipment.

5 Reasons Why You Should Learn Radio Now

(1) **The Radio Repair Business is Booming.** Because of the shortage of new sets, and increased interest in Radio programs, fixing Radios offers many extra new opportunities for Radio Technicians. (2) **U. S. Government is calling** for thousands of CIVILIAN Radio Technicians, Operators and is paying well for their services. (3) **Government Orders for Radio Equipment,** amounting to millions of dollars are creating opportunities for men with Radio training to earn good pay, overtime. (4) **Radio is Ready to Expand After the War.** Television, Frequency Modulation Electronic Instruments and Controls will offer new opportunities in the future. (5) **Extra Pay in Army, Navy, Too!** Radio Training offers men likely to enter military service, soldiers, sailors, marines, many opportunities to win extra rank, extra prestige, more interesting duty and earn up to 6 times a private's base pay.

Why Many Radio Technicians Make $30, $40, $50 a Week

Radio is one of the country's fastest-growing peacetime industries. It is vital industry during wartime, too. That's why N.R.I. trained Radio Technicians and Operators earn good pay in practically every branch of Radio today; in Broadcasting, Aviation, Commercial, Police, Marine, Government Radio Stations; in Radio Factories; fixing Radio sets in spare time or full time; in Radio businesses of their own. Many fields of Radio are expanding fast during the war. Many more new branches of Radio (Television, Frequency Modulation, etc.), held back now, will create new peacetime opportunities after the war. N. R. I. gives you the required knowledge of Radio to take advantage of these present and future opportunities.

Beginners Soon Learn to Make $5, $10 a Week Extra in Spare Time

Part time Radio Technicians have more opportunities now than ever before. In fact, many men I train prefer to hold their regular jobs, and make extra money fixing Radio sets in their spare time. I give you special training and show you how to start fixing Radios early. You also get my **6 Big Kits of Radio Parts** and instructions for building test equipment, for conducting experiments which give you valuable, practical experience. My fifty-fifty method—half working with real Radio parts, half studying my lesson texts—makes learning Radio at home interesting, fascinating, practical.

Find Out How I Train You for Good Pay in Radio—NOW!

MAIL THE COUPON BELOW! I'll send my big 64-page book FREE. It tells about my Course; the types of jobs in the different branches of Radio today; Radio's opportunities for the future; shows letters from more than 100 men I trained so you can see what civilian and service men are doing, earning. You owe it to yourself to get these facts NOW. MAIL THE COUPON in an envelope or pasted on a penny postcard.

J. E. SMITH, President
Dept. 2DS9, National Radio Institute
Washington, D. C.

These Men and Hundreds More Got Their Start This Way

$200 a Month In Own Business

For several years I have been in business for myself making around $200 a month. Business has steadily increased. I have N. R. I. to thank for my start in this field. —ARLIE J. FROEHNER, 300 W. Texas Ave., Goose Creek, Texas.

$5 to $10 Extra a Week in Spare Time

I am engaged in spare time Radio work. I average from $5 to $10 a week. I often wished that I had enrolled sooner because all this extra money sure does come in handy.—THEODORE K. DuBREE, Horsham, Penna.

Operating Naval Radio Station

I am now operating the Radio Range Station, one of the new simultaneous types, here at the Naval Air Station. Glad to give N. R. I. its share of credit in the success I have had thus far.—GRIFFITH SECHLER, Radioman First Class, U.S. Navy (Address omitted for military reasons.)

MAIL NOW for Quick Action

J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 2DS9
National Radio Institute, Washington, D. C.

Mail me FREE, without obligation, your 64-page book "Rich Rewards in Radio" which tells about Radio's opportunities now and for the future. (No salesman will call. Write plainly.)

Name ..... Age.....

Address .....

City ..... State.....

SIX SHORT NOVELS IN THIS ISSUE!

MAY ISSUE ★ PUBLISHED APRIL 3rd!

STAR WESTERN

THE BIG 144-PAGE MAGAZINE

VOLUME TWENTY-SIX APRIL, 1942 NUMBER THREE

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ Six Complete Short Novels ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

DEATH BUYS A TRAIL HERD.....*WALT COBURN* 10
Why was peaceful old "Maw" McKenzie hired on at fighting wages to pilot Waldron's brand-blot herd north to Dodge—when that Injun-eyed cowman knew the trail like his own back yard; knew, too, that McKenzie was no gun-fighter,—and had even marked him for bloody wipe-out in the lawless Strip?

HOSS GREER'S DEAL WITH THE DEVIL...*HARRY F. OLMSTED* 36
That prideful, lovable old cattle-baron would have gladly paid six times the asking price for the rich Long T ranch. . . . But the ten thousand dollars he did pay was—had he known it—just enough to deed him a shallow six-by-three grave!

SHORT-HANDED IN HELL!.....*WILLIAM R. COX* 54
A fugitive from desert-country justice, the Duke rode back to the range which had disowned him—to unite both honest men and hired killers in the strangest desert manhunt in the red-stained history of that violent frontier.

JOHN IRONS' LAST GUN-CHORE.....*DEE LINFORD* 74
Lawless law said that men might ride into that grim Hole-in-the-Wall hideout—but it also decreed that no badge-toter might ride out alive. John Irons, however, was just reckless—or mad—enough to try his hand at changing that deadly bushwhack statute.

DEACON BOTTLE'S WHISKEY REBELLION...*R. E. MAHAFFAY* 92
They said that Deacon Bottle was a worthless, drunken old reprobate . . . that he was set to wage war on all honest men from here on out. But the real tragedy came when the Deacon had to blast all young Rip Carter's hope and faith in him by going through with his grim and deadly role!

GUNS UP—HERE'S BULLWHIP BILL!.....*TOM ROAN* 110
It was necessary, Bullwhip Bill McCrackin knew, that Sheriff Hat Hatfield must die, to win safety for Bill's cowmen friends. But that crooked badge-toting killer fired first with his ultimatum: "As long as I'm alive, your neighbors live too. When I'm dead the wolves close in. Now, damn yuh, grin!"

★ ★ Star Features ★ ★

THE AUGURIN' PEN.....*OLD WRANGLER* 6
A chance to have your say on everything and anything that's part of the West—horses, gunmen, ranching, or what-have-you. . . .

UP THE TRAIL.....*A DEPARTMENT* 134
Whenever there's a real job to be done, your real frontiersman has always been in there fighting. . . .

ALL STORIES NEW NO REPRINTS!

Published every month by Popular Publications, Inc., 2256 Grove Street, Chicago, Illinois. Editorial and executive offices, 205 East Forty-second Street, New York City. Harry Steeger, President and Secretary; Harold S. Goldsmith, Vice-President and Treasurer. Entered as second-class matter September 5, 1933, at the post office at Chicago, Ill., under the Act of March 3, 1879. Title registration pending at U. S. Patent Office. Copyright, 1942, by Popular Publications, Inc. All rights reserved under Pan American Copyright Convention. Single copy price 15c. U. S. A. Yearly subscription in U. S. A. $1.80. Subscription Department, 205 East 42nd Street, New York City. For advertising rates address Sam J. Perry, 205 E. 42nd St., New York, N. Y. When submitting manuscripts kindly enclose stamped self-addressed envelope for their return if found unavailable, and send to Editorial Department, 205 East 42nd Street, N. Y. C. The publishers cannot accept responsibility for return of unsolicited manuscripts, although all care will be exercised in handling them. Printed in U. S. A.

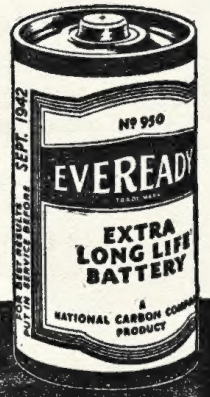
"LIFE WAS SLIPPING THROUGH HIS ICY FINGERS!"

A true experience of special policeman FRANK HAHNEL, *New York, N. Y.*

"IT WAS STILL DARK...and bitter cold on the waterfront...when I finished my night patrol," writes Mr. Hahnel. "I had paused for a moment to say hello to a couple of friends when above the dismal sounds of the river came a piercing shriek and a heavy splash. Then there was silence.

"WE RUSHED FOR THE WHARF. I yanked out my flashlight and turned it on the water. There in the icy river 14 feet below we saw a man struggling feebly... clawing at the ice-sheathed pilings as the out-racing tide sucked him away from the pier.

"QUICKLY I DARTED my light about and located a length of line on a nearby barge...and a life preserver on an adjoining pier. In an instant the preserver splashed in the water beside the drowning man. Dazed from shock and cold, half clinging to the preserver and half lassoed by the line, he was dragged to safety. Thanks to my 'Eveready' flashlight and its dependable *fresh* DATED batteries the river was cheated of its victim. *(Signed)* Frank J. Hahnel"



The word "Eveready" is a registered trade-mark of National Carbon Company, Inc.

FRESH BATTERIES LAST LONGER... *Look for the* **DATE-LINE**

NATIONAL CARBON COMPANY, INC., 30 EAST 42nd STREET, NEW YORK, N. Y.

Unit of Union Carbide and Carbon Corporation

UCC

THE AUGURIN' PEN

Conducted by Old Wrangler

What's the longest game shot you've ever heard of? What made some of the old-time Western gunmen tick? Was Wild Bill Hickok —and other mighty figures of frontier lore—really as majestic as they have been painted? These, and other questions and augurments are taken up here. And it's your turn to put your "two-bits worth" of talk!

JUDGING from the letters which have poured in to Old Wrangler during the past thirty days or so, it would appear that it is guns and gunmen of the old West about which readers of *Star Western* want most to augur at this time. I have been pulling leather in an effort to answer letters to folks scattered all the way from Eureka—up among the redwoods on Humboldt Bay, California—to Raleigh, and from Miami to Bellingham. Most of these folks wanted to augur this and that about guns and gunmen in the old West. And why. . . .

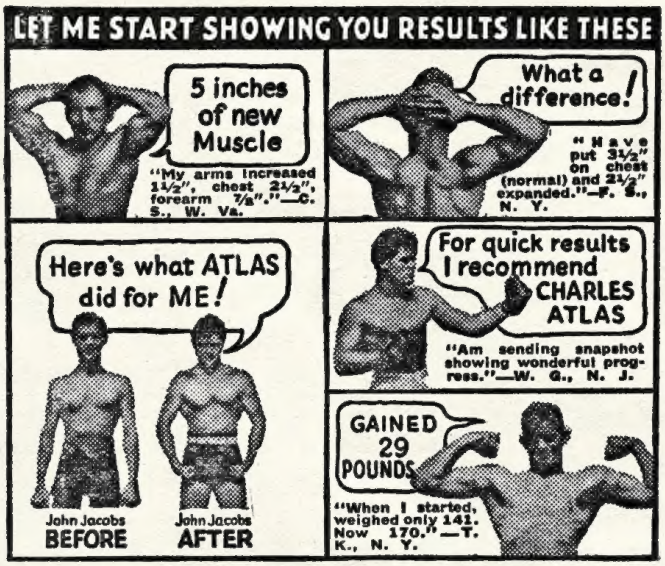
From Fort Riley came a letter from a chap with whose father I rode in Montana, many years ago. He declares that when he gets out of the Army he intends to make his home in the Madison River valley, not far from the little town of Cameron.

The cavalryman's name is Homer Hitchcock, and he came from out Norton way. Now he is in G Troop, 17th United States Cavalry. Homer wants to know what was the greatest distance at which anyone ever shot a deer.

"No tall-timber yarn. Honest measured distance."

Really, I haven't any idea. I have heard stories of the exploits of most long-distance shots told by some of the biggest liars on earth. The query intrigues me, at that. Maybe some of the readers of this

Will You Let Me PROVE I Can Make YOU a *New Man?*


LET ME START SHOWING YOU RESULTS LIKE THESE
5 inches of new Muscle
"My arms increased 1½", chest 2½", forearm ⅞"."—C. S., W. Va.
What a difference!
"Have put 3½" on chest (normal) and 2½" expanded."—F. S., N. Y.
Here's what ATLAS did for ME!
John Jacobs BEFORE
John Jacobs AFTER
For quick results I recommend CHARLES ATLAS
"Am sending snapshot showing wonderful progress."—W. G., N. J.
GAINED 29 POUNDS
"When I started, weighed only 141. Now 170."—T. K., N. Y.

CHARLES ATLAS

Awarded the title of "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man" in international contest—in competition with ALL men who would consent to appear against him.

This is a recent photo of Charles Atlas showing how he looks today. This is not a studio picture but an actual untouched snapshot.

Here's What Only 15 Minutes a Day Can Do For You

I DON'T care how old or young you are, or how ashamed of your present physical condition you may be. If you can simply raise your arm and flex it I can add SOLID MUSCLE to your biceps—yes, on each arm—in double-quick time! Only 15 minutes a day—right in your own home—is all the time I ask of you! And there's no cost if I fail.

I can broaden your shoulders, strengthen your back, develop your whole muscular system INSIDE and OUTSIDE! I can add inches to your chest, give you a vise-like grip, make those legs of yours lithe and powerful. I can shoot new strength into your old backbone, exercise those inner organs, help you cram your body so full of pep, vigor and red-blooded vitality that you won't feel there's even "standing room" left for weakness and that lazy feeling! Before I get through with you I'll have your whole frame "measured" to a nice, new, beautiful suit of muscle!

What's My Secret?

"Dynamic Tension!" That's the ticket! The identical natural method that I myself developed to change my body from the scrawny, skinny-chested weakling I was at 17 to my present super-man physique! Thousands of other fellows are becoming marvelous physical specimens—my way. I give you no gadgets or contraptions to fool with. When you have learned to develop your Strength through *"Dynamic Tension"* you can laugh at artificial muscle-makers. You simply utilize the DORMANT muscle-power in your own God-given body—watch it increase and multiply double-quick into real solid LIVE MUSCLE.

My method—*"Dynamic Tension"*—will turn the trick for you. No theory—every exercise is practical. And, man, so easy! Spend only 15 minutes a day in your own home. From the very start you'll be using my method of *"Dynamic Tension"* almost unconsciously every minute of the day—walking, bending over, etc.—to BUILD MUSCLE and VITALITY.

FREE BOOK

"Everlasting Health and Strength"

In it I talk to you in straight-from-the-shoulder language. Packed with inspirational pictures of myself and pupils—fellows who became NEW MEN in strength, my way. Let me show you what I helped THEM do. See what I can do for YOU! For a real thrill, send for this book today. AT ONCE. CHARLES ATLAS, Dept. 83S, 115 East 23rd St., New York City.

CHARLES ATLAS, Dept. 83S
115 East 23rd St., New York, N. Y.

I want the proof that your system of *"Dynamic Tension"* will help make a New Man of me—give me a healthy, husky body and big muscular development. Send me your free book, "Everlasting Health and Strength."

Name.....
(Please print or write plainly)

Address.....

City..... State.....

magazine can give us accurate information.

I remember a story which went the rounds out in Wyoming, years ago in the early Nineties, to the effect that a ranny up Jackson Hole way knocked over a moose with a Remington .32 rifle at five hundred forty yards. I don't know, I wasn't there. But here is a story I can vouch for. It was well authenticated, although I wasn't *there,* either. But I do know it happened!

Norrell Gregory, whose stories appear frequently in these pages, tells this one:

Several years ago he was out in Colorado, west of Denver. One morning very early he was sitting on the side of a hill overlooking a little valley which dropped down about five hundred feet, when a huge antlered buck appeared in a log patch on the opposite side of the valley—the same one, probably, he had seen there the evening before. It was too far away, he thought, to try a shot with his .30-30 Winchester, but his finger itched to try. Finally he got the front sight on the deer just as it started to run back toward the tall timber on the far side of the valley, clearing log piles ten feet high. Norrell slowly pulled the trigger. The buck kept on going. . . .

About an hour later Norrell made his way down the slope and across the valley. He found blood on the ground near the spot where first he had sighted the deer. He trailed it. Back in the brush a dozen yards he found the carcass. A soft-nosed bullet had struck the animal a little above the hip-bone on the left side, and had travelled entirely through its body, lodging just under the skin, on its neck.

That bullet had travelled exactly eight hundred, eighty yards! Norrell measured it, carefully—and there were two witnesses.

Norrell concluded by saying: "If you try *that* on the boys, get ready to duck!"

Now what? Maybe you, too, have shot big game at long range. Or maybe you know some one who has; or maybe you have heard a story of some long-range shooting. I'll be watching for your letters.

★

SPEAKING of long-range shooting reminds me that in the old days there wasn't a great deal of rifle-shooting—except in big-game hunting, and fighting Indians. In the old West the shooting was done mostly with short guns —revolvers. I've noted, in this connection, that, in most Western fiction I have read, most of the shooting was done with .44's, .45's and .48's. I've done a heap of shooting with short guns myself—mostly at tin cans, and at hats thrown into the air —and at cacti and such. But I have seen a lot of the real thing done, at one time and another, all the way from the Rio Grande to the Piney Buttes.

From along about Ninety-Two or so, say, most of the short gun shooting was done with a .32-20. It has been my experience that a .32-20 has it all over any other caliber. The kick is tremendously reduced, for one thing. The balance is better. It's easier to pull out of a scabbard. And the range, I believe, is almost doubled. Of course it is faster—and usually one can do more accurate shooting with a .32-20 than with a .48, or any other.

When I was young, living on a ranch, there was a grizzled old-timer on the spread who had crossed the plains to the Pacific coast, away back in Fifty-One. He had fought Indians all the way from Fort Kearney to the Deschutes valley. He knew more about revolvers than any other half-dozen men I ever met up with. He had two .32's, which he had carried all the way from Independence to Jimtown and back, and which had been about burned out in Indian fights. This ranny insisted that most of the real gun-fighters back in the old days preferred a .32 to a .45, any-

(Continued on page 136)

Showing the wide assortment in the $2.98 'oodle box'

The oodle box

—the perfect year 'round gift for men in service!

$2.98 'oodle box' *contains:*

Woodbury's Shave Cream, large; 4 Pal razor blades, hollow ground; styptic pencil; Squibb Dental Cream; Faultless Nylon toothbrush; Jergen's soap; XBA Foot & Body powder, large; Westphal's Hair Tonic, large; pocket comb; White & Wyckoff stationery; Blitz polishing cloth; Griffin shoe polish, large; shoe cloth; Beaded Tip shoe laces; Pull EZ mending kit; three magazines—Adventure, Big Book Detective, Big Book Western.

***regular retail value* over $3.00**

$4.98 'oodle box' *contains:*

Squibb Shave Cream, large; 8 Pal razor blades, hollow ground; Woodbury shave lotion, large; styptic pencil; Faultless Nylon toothbrush; Squibb Dental Cream; Jergen's soap; XBA Foot & Body powder, large; Westphal's Hair Tonic, large; pocket comb; LaCross nail file; 1 lb. Charms, hard candy; Service Man's Creed; White & Wyckoff stationery; Eagle lead pencil; copy Reader's Digest; adhesive bandages; Blitz polishing cloth; Griffin shoe polish, large; Beaded Tip shoe laces; Pull EZ mending mending kit; packet of cartoon postcards; steel mirror.

***regular retail value* over $5.00**

To cover packing, insurance, prepaid shipment and all Federal taxes, add 60c to above prices. For points on Pacific Coast or overseas, add 75c.

Contents of boxes previously packed, in distribution and a few in stock, vary slightly from above lists. Equivalent retail value guaranteed.

Give name of unit and last known address. We guarantee delivery, or money refunded.

Contains articles of standard merchandise—items not issued by the government—wanted, needed, used every day by every man in the services. The happiest looking, most sensible gift box that brings him oodles of cheer, saves him oodles of dough, makes his patriotic pay go farther . . . Thousands already sent, and welcomed everywhere. If your local stores do not yet sell 'oodle boxes', fill out the coupon, and make some man happy with an oodle box!

KATE SMITH speaks: "grandest surprise package you ever saw in your life." N. Y. Daily News: "a grand gift number . . . named by an Army Colonel who saw one." Pvt. M. G., Camp Lee, Va.: "big surprise . . . lifts the morale." Pvt. M. S., Bangor, Me.: "feels good to receive such a gift . . . shows that the people back home haven't forgotten you." Sgt. H. G. R., Camp Blanding, Fla.: "fine assortment, wisely chosen."

THE 'OODLE BOX' CO., M. O. Dept., 210 E. 43 St., N. Y. C.

'oodle box' Co., Mail Order Dept., 210 East 43rd St., N. Y. C.

Herewith $..... (*check or money order*) please send

..... **STANDARD 'oodle boxes' @ $2.98 each**

..... **JUMBO 'oodle boxes' @ $4.98 each**

Plus 60c or 75c to cover all charges as outlined

To.....

.....

from.....

.....

If you wish to order more than one 'oodle box,' send your list of names on a separate sheet.

"Maw" McKenzie—Trail Boss

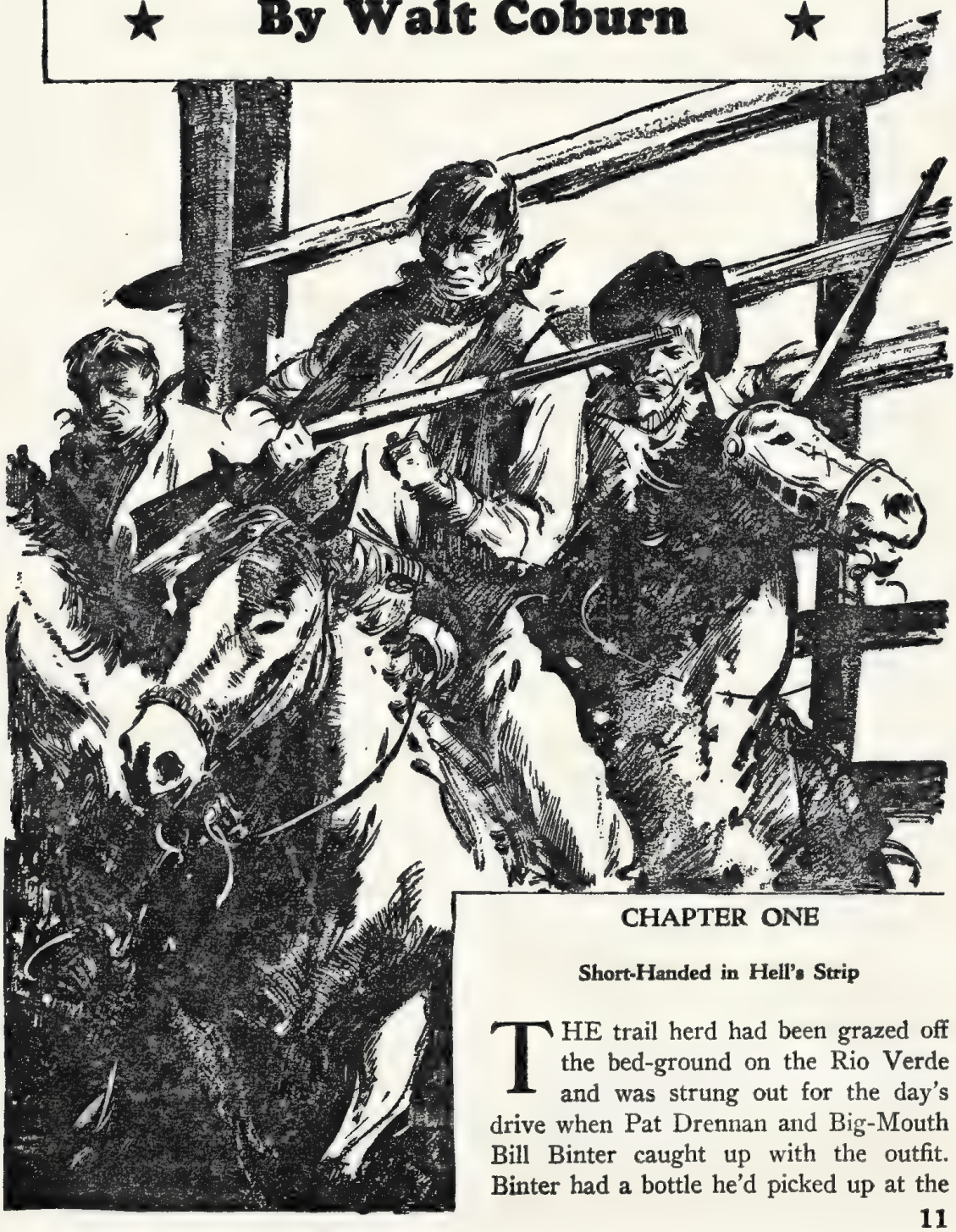
"Come an' git it, Ranger!" Waldron yelled as he jumped his horse into the midst of the men. . . .

Old, white-whiskered "Maw" McKenzie was the best trail-boss that ever shoved a beef herd north to roaring Dodge, but for all that, he was no gun-fighter. Why, then, did that Injun-eyed Texas cowman pay him fighting wages to pilot his cattle up the perilous trail that he, himself, knew as well as any man alive? And why—above all—did that Texan take cold-blooded joy in killing off his own tough riders, when they must hit Hell's Strip already short-handed?

Death Buys a Trail Herd

A Smashing Saga of the Bloody Cattle Trail — "North to Dodge!"

★ **By Walt Coburn** ★



CHAPTER ONE

Short-Handed in Hell's Strip

THE trail herd had been grazed off the bed-ground on the Rio Verde and was strung out for the day's drive when Pat Drennan and Big-Mouth Bill Binter caught up with the outfit. Binter had a bottle he'd picked up at the

little cow town of Verde, where he and Drennan had ridden last night after they'd gotten off last guard. They split up now and took swing positions on opposite sides of the moving cattle, Binter riding in behind the grizzled trail-boss, "Maw" McKenzie, while Drennan followed the raw-boned, Injun-haired Texan, Burt Waldron, owner of the herd in his Round W road-iron.

The white-mustached old trail-boss had been nicknamed Maw because of the way he could mother a herd up the trail. He had a reputation of having fewer losses and putting more tallow on their ribs when his herds finally reached their destination than most trail drivers who "walked 'em North."

Maw looked almighty worried, and Waldron, ugly-tempered from last night's bout with a quart of forty-rod whiskey, had a horn drooped. He was trying to get a range count on the cattle.

Burt Waldron, his opaque black eyes bloodshot, had ridden up on a rise and stopped and motioned with his arm at the herd. Maw McKenzie waved back from a little knoll where he had pulled up and they began getting a count on the cattle that were stringing out between them.

Binter was loud-mouthed drunk and kept calling profane jokes to Pat Drennan on the other side of the herd as they rode the swing. Dust puffed up along the line that stretched back a mile or more. Dust, with the sunrise painting it a golden haze.

Then Binter began cutting through the string of moving cattle to carry his bottle and joshing to Pat Drennan.

Each time he rode across the herd the steady walk-pace stopped. The cattle bunched up and then strung out again to fill the gap. If Binter was doing it to get Burt Waldron riled, he was making a big success of it, because the black haired Texan was having a time fighting his temper and getting an accurate count.

Whenever he called out "Hundred!" Waldron would take a .45 cartridge from one pocket of his bullhide chaps and drop it into the other pocket.

Binter rode back through the string of cattle with his bottle. Burt Waldron hollered across to him, his voice harsh: "Don't do that no more, Binter!"

Bill Binter yelled some profanity and turned his horse back again through the string. That put him on the same side of the herd as Waldron, and as he rode towards the cowman he was shouting something that sounded like fight talk. But at that minute Waldron was shouting to his trail-boss.

"Tally fifty-eight with that black steer with the busted horn, McKenzie! Keep a-countin'. Don't lose the tally."

Binter was a couple of hundred yards away when Waldron looked up at him. The cowman didn't waste any time. He jerked the .30-30 carbine from his saddle scabbard. He fired twice without lifting the gun any higher than his saddle horn. Both shots struck Binter squarely in the belly.

Binter had packed no saddle gun, and the range had been much too far for the six-shooter he had never lived long enough to draw. Binter slumped forward on the saddle horn and then slid off sideways, still hanging onto his half empty bottle of whiskey. He landed on his head and shoulders and rolled over on his back, his glazing eyes staring up at the morning.

If Binter had figured on making it a six-shooter fight he had calculated all wrong. Burt Waldron had never let him get that close. It was cold-blooded murder.

Waldron's saddle gun cracked again and the bullet cut over Pat Drennan's head. "You takin' it up fer Binter?" Waldron shouted.

"My saddle-gun's in the bed wagon!"

shouted red-headed Pat Drennan. "The sign ain't right!"

"Then ketch Binter's horse and keep them cattle strung out!"

Burt Waldron levered the empty shell from his carbine and shoved fresh cartridges into the magazine. His voice was harsh and ugly as he shouted across to Maw McKenzie.

"What's your tally, mister?"

"Pick it up with that brockle faced steer at seventy-five!" called the grizgled trail boss.

Less than twenty head of cattle had passed along from the time Burt Waldron quit tallying cattle to kill a man, then pick up the tally.

Maw McKenzie, his thick white hair and drooping white mustache ruffled by the morning breeze, his puckered sky-blue eyes a little more worried now, had watched the killing without missing count. Pat Drennan was leading the dead man's horse as he rode back along the cattle to keep them moving.

★

AT THE dust-hidden end of the herd, the drag men had seen nothing of what had happened. As they came along with the drags they saw Waldron and Maw McKenzie tallying out the last of the cattle. Pat Drennan's wide mouth under his long upper lip lacked its habitual grin and his green eyes were like slits of glass. Then they saw what was left of Binter. It was a grim picture, and it sobered the men.

Burt Waldron kept Pat Drennan beyond six-shooter distance. He rode with his saddle gun across his lap. "What did you make that count, McKenzie?" he called out.

Maw McKenzie had been tallying the hundreds by tying knots in his bridle reins and shifting matches from the pocket of his pants to his shirt pocket. He counted knots and matches.

"Thirty-two hundred and twenty-nine head!" he called out.

"Then somebody spilled cattle last night. Should tally close to thirty-three hundred!"

"We left Texas with less'n three thousand," said the grizzled trail boss. "Your herd ain't what you'd call shrinkin' in number."

"That damn Binter," the owner of the trail herd grinned mirthlessly, "gittin' hisself killed and leavin' the outfit short-handed thataway. . . . !

"Ride on back to town, Maw. Hire me two good, tough cowhands. Pat Drennan might figger he wants to take 'er up where his big-mouthed pardner left off. It'll be to his sorrow. Fetch two cowhands from Verde. And don't be all day about it."

Burt Waldron lifted his voice. "You, Drennan, git a shovel outa the bed wagon and plant Binter where he lays. Then ketch up with the outfit, or tell the nighthawk to dump your bedroll outa the bed wagon. Maw McKenzie will pay you off in Verde. Rattle your hocks . . . . You men quit gawkin. Keep them cattle walkin' north. We ain't holdin' no damned wake over Binter's carcass."

Maw McKenzie saw Pat Drennan ride away at a lope. The mess wagon and bed wagon and remuda were swinging around the trail herd. Maw McKenzie, as he rode back towards the little cowtown, wondered if the red-headed Drennan was after a shovel or his saddle gun.

He was glad to get away from Waldron right now. With the whiskey dying out of his system, Waldron was ugly as hell. There were times when Maw wanted to ride away from this trail outfit and keep right on riding back to Texas. But Maw needed the big money this black haired Texas cowman was paying him to pilot the trail herd north to Dodge City.

Waldron had said he'd never been up the trail. And from what Maw McKenzie

was picking up from the cowpuncher's talk, Burt Waldron was quitting Texas with his cattle because the Lone Star country was getting a little too lawful.

Even now, on his way across the Oklahoma strip, Waldron could not change his ways. His trail herd gathered strays and those strays were being put into his Round W road-iron. On both sides of the Red River the tough cowhands who worked for Burt Waldron were taking little pasears and showing up about third or last guard-time with little bunches of stray cattle. They packed running irons and saddle guns and were the toughest bunch of cowhands old Maw McKenzie had ever gone north with. And Maw had gone up every long cattle trail out of Texas with big herds and good cowhands.

But when a man is broke, the wages he'll get will mebbyso save his little outfit down on the Nueces, so an old cowhand can't afford to be choosy.

Burt Waldron had hired him back yonder at Cow Gap, north on the trail from where it crosses the San Saba. Hired him at twice or three times what even the big outfits were paying a trail boss. It had seemed almighty queer then . . . . But as the trail herd moved on, Maw McKenzie began to savvy why he was drawing down big pay. The Round W was a sticky outfit, as Pat Drennan put it. Stray cattle stuck to it like flies to spilled sorghum.

They had crossed the Red River, and this strip of country between Doan's Crossing on the Red, and the Canadian River in Oklahoma, was tough country. It was called No Man's Land, and it was good cow country. It was also outlaw country.

"Most outfits," Maw McKenzie had told Burt Waldron, "lose cattle crossin' this strip."

Waldron's big teeth had showed in a flat lipped grin. "This herd ain't spillin' cattle nowheres along the trail, mister. You point them dogies north and keep 'em walkin'. That's your job. My cowhands will take care of the loss and the gain."

Before they'd got the trail herd across the Red and out of Texas, there'd been a gun fight back at Vernon. Some of the Round W cowpunchers had been killed, along with some of the Texans who had tried to hold up the herd to make a cut for strays. So at Doan's Crossing on the Red River, Maw had hired Pat Drennan and Bill Binter to take the places of a couple of Waldron's cowhands whose toughness had not made their hides bullet proof.

Maw saw Pat Drennan stop the bed wagon long enough to get a shovel and his saddle gun and Binter's tarp to wrap up his dead body.

The old trail boss cut over that way and stopped the red-haired cowpuncher. "Better hit the trail for town with me, Pat."

"I got a chore to tend to, Maw."

"I'll send a wagon out with a box for Binter. Bury him in the boothill at Verde. Mebbyso a sky pilot to read a Bible at his grave."

"Binter would rather be buried where he dropped. I'm obliged, Maw. You're a white man."

Pat Drennan's eyes stopped the old trail boss from any further talk. Cowpunchers like Pat Drennan were almighty headlong and sot in their ways. . . . The red headed cowpuncher rode on, and Maw headed for town to hire a couple of tough hands.

Somewhere in this strip called No Man's Land rode another wild and reckless young cowhand. Unless he had been killed. And the memory of that headstrong wild cowboy rode this morning with the old trail boss.

NEARLY ten years ago, when Maw McKenzie had been a Texas Ranger, and his son Malcolm had just gotten his Ranger commission, and when their little cow outfit down on the Nueces had been paying, the Ranger captain had ridden from San Antonio to the McKenzie ranch.

"I'd rather you heard it straight from me than from somebody that wasn't your friend, Maw," the Ranger captain said, taking all the sunshine out of that bright morning. "Malcolm got on a big drunk and he's killed two Rangers and quit the country. I got to send a man after him. It'll go hard with that boy of yourn if he's fetched back to Texas alive. It'll be a hangin'."

"I'll go after him, Cap. I'll fetch Malcom back to face the music."

Ranger Maw McKenzie followed his son's trail north, up into this very strip of renegade country. And he followed a cold trail. Then one night, when he was camped on the Canadian River cooking a slim supper at a little campfire, Malcom McKenzie had ridden up out of the night.

The tall, tow-headed, ex-Ranger had hard little lines etched around the corners of his eyes and his mouth. Grim lines that had not been there before.

"Better ride back," Malcolm McKenzie told his father, "before some of these renegade outlaws take a notion to bushwhack you. I'll ride back with you to Doan's Crossin'."

"You killed two Texas Rangers, son. You're comin' back to stand trial."

Malcolm McKenzie smiled grimly and shook his head. He camped that night with his father, and they talked.

Maw McKenzie and his son Malcolm rode back together as far as Doan's Crossing on Red River. There they shook hands, and Malcolm rode back into No Man's Land. When Maw McKenzie got back to San Antonio he resigned his Ranger commission.

For speedy shaves, try Thin Gillette!
With ease and comfort, man, you get
That well-groomed look for which gals root
And save yourself some dough to boot!
Made of easy-flexing steel hard enough to cut glass
THIN
Gillette
BLADES
Produced By The Maker Of The Famous Gillette Blue Blade.
4 for 10c
8 for 19c
Save Extra Money! Get The Big New Economy Package, 12 For 27c

"That boy of mine never murdered nobody," he told the Ranger captain. "I had a talk with him. My son never lied to me in his life. I didn't fetch him back to be hung for another man's crimes. Don't ask me no questions and you'll not put me to the bother of sayin' nothin'. Malcolm McKenzie will ride back to Texas when he gits his job done."

Malcolm McKenzie's was a one-man lone-handed job. Somewhere, if he was still alive, that tall, tow-headed young Texan was working at that dangerous job right now.

"If ever I need your help," young McKenzie had told his father, "I'll deal you in. . . . Till then, I'm just what Texas calls me—an outlaw. I'm trailin' with the wolf pack till it comes time to turn ag'in' 'em."

That was the way of it. And Maw McKenzie kept his mouth shut and his eyes and ears open.

He rode into the little cow-town. Verde was no more than a saloon and general store and a few adobe buildings scattered along a little river where the Western Trail crossed it.

Half a dozen saddled horses, with their brands either blotched or altered, stood at the hitchrack in front of the saloon. The old trail boss knew that they were being ridden by the renegades who called No Man's Land their range. Chaps hung from saddle horns. Carbines were in every saddle scabbard. Smaller scabbards held running irons and catch-ropes.

Maw McKenzie stepped off his horse and walked into the saloon. His puckered blue eyes dimmed a little with disappointment as he searched the crowd for the face of his son Malcolm.

A tall young cowpuncher with wiry black hair grinned faintly. The others just stared at the little old trail boss with cold-eyed appraisal. Their talk died out, leaving an unpleasant, tense silence in the saloon. The bartender stopped polishing a glass with a bar towel. His bloodshot eyes looked the trail boss over, and his whiskey voice fell across the silence.

"This feller's one they call Maw. He's the trail boss. Feller named Burt Waldron owns the cattle in the Round W road iron . . . . Boys, I just got the place swamped out. Take your killin' outside."

Maw McKenzie's puckered blue eyes were hard and bright as they cut a quick look across the crowd. Then he looked at the black-haired cowpuncher.

"Last night when I was in here," Maw drawled to the puncher, "would have bin a better time for a ruckus. The others don't look like they had much sense or too much guts. But you look like you might do to take along. Burt Waldron killed a feller called Binter this mornin'. I'm hirin' a man to take Binter's place."

"You got a gall, Gran'paw," said a rawboned man with a yellow stubble of whiskers, gulping his drink, "A hell of a gall. I got a mind to—"

"Change it," said Maw McKenzie—"if there is a mind inside that skull. If it's as dirty as the rest of your carcass, it needs changin' bad."

The tall, black-haired cowpuncher's grin twisted.

"I just got the place swamped out," wheezed the bartender, "Take it outside in the street, men."

"The boys here," said the young cowpuncher, "watched you comin'. They got it made to string you up. That news you fetched about Big Mouthed Binter just about cinches it. Your Round W trail herd has bin gatherin' too many cattle along the trail. You know any reason why we shouldn't take you out and hang you to a cottonwood limb?"

"Yeah. One reason."

Maw McKenzie's wooden handled six-shooter was in his hand. Its hammer clicked to full cock. It was swinging in a short, flat arc on a level with their bellies.

He stood there, a lean, wiry little bow-legged cowhand with white mane and mustache, his blue eyes glinting under bushy brows.

There was the sound of shod hoofs outside. The jingle of spur rowels. The clump of boot heels.

Maw McKenzie knew that a man was coming into the saloon, coming up behind him. He could see the eyes of the black-headed young cowhand change expression, his grin twisting sideways. But the man with the yellow whiskers had his hand on his gun, and his pale eyes held murder. This gang of tough hands meant to hang him. If he turned his head, they'd be on him like a wolf pack. And if he didn't turn. . . .

A strong, freckled hand grabbed Maw McKenzie's shirt collar. The mate to that hand grabbed the long barrel of his six-shooter, yanking it down with a jerk that sent a .45 slug from it crashing into the hard-packed dirt floor of the saloon.

It was Pat Drennan, and he had moved with catlike speed.

★

THERE was a wide grin on the red-haired cowpuncher's face as he stood between the bewildered old trail boss and the gang of tough cowpunchers from No Man's Land.

"I busted my shovel, Maw. Had to come to town for a diggin' spade. Just take 'er easy. Wasn't you bitin' off kind of a big hunk of trouble for one young feller?"

Nobody had spoken to Pat Drennan, but Maw McKenzie could tell by their actions that they knew the red-headed cowboy. He guessed that Pat had been —and perhaps still was—one of their renegade outfit.

The man with the yellow whiskers had been holding a coiled saddle rope in his hand. Somebody had untied the hondo and fashioned a hangman's knot in it. Freckled Pat Drennan scowled at the rope and at the man who held it.

Then his green eyes shifted to the grinning young cowpuncher with the wiry black hair. "Gettin' kinda in a lather wasn't you, Harve?"

"I dunno, Speckle-Face," his grin widened, "We was just throwin' a little scare into the old feller. He's the trail boss of that cow-thief outfit, ain't he?"

"I shore admire the way you had Maw McKenzie scared," said Pat Drennan. "Another second he'd have bin borin' holes in your belly-buttons! Rube's hide still looks green under the dirt. That carpetbagger is goin' to fix up one of them knots of his some time and somebody is just nacherally goin' to string him up with his own ketch-rope. I don't know ary soul who would take the trouble to cut Rube down if he found him swingin' and kickin'. . . . Let's you and me have us a little horn, Maw. We need strong likker to take the bad taste of Waldron out of our mouths."

"He says," the black-haired Harve indicated Maw with a nod, "that Big-Mouthed Binter got killed."

Pat Drennan nodded. "Binter was beggin' for it. And when he got what he'd bin crowdin' for, he wasn't in shape to take his own part. Waldron gut-shot him. . . . You pick up them cattle me'n Binter dropped on last guard?"

"There wasn't but a handful."

"If there'd bin more spilled," Pat Drennan shoved the bar bottle at Maw McKenzie, "Waldron would laid over to pick 'em up. "I'm lettin' ourn go on to Dodge."

Maw filled his glass and shoved the bottle back. Pat Drennan poured himself a drink and slid the bottle along. They were all bellied up to the pine bar, talking among themselves and paying little or no attention to the little old trail boss. But now and then Maw caught the raw-

boned, yellow-whiskered man's eyes covertly watching him.

Now the yellow-whiskered man shoved a wad of cut plug into his jaw and his big fist banged the bar. "By hell, Drennan, I don't like no part of it. I got cattle in that drive. This li'l' ol' thing here has put 'em in the Round W road iron. Binter was my pardner, and you stand by and let him git killed off. If you fellers had listened to me, we'd have that whole damn' trail herd. We coulda took it last night!"

"Maw McKenzie," said Pat Drennan, "kin tell you how that was tried yonder side of the Red. Waldron's cowhands don't just fool around at bein' hard citizens. They play for keeps. . . . Maw, how many cattle in Rube's Bar R brand would you say we got in that Round W road-iron?"

Maw McKenzie took a little shabby leather covered tally book from his pocket. He glanced at the brands and tally numbers and shoved the book back in his pocket.

"Eighteen head," he said in his soft drawl, "countin' the ones that's bin worked from some other brand into his Bar R iron."

"Pay Rube," Pat Drennan said to the black haired Harve, "for eighteen head of steers. Then let him take his bellyache somewheres else. Him and his damn' hangin' rope!"

Pat Drennan's grin was gone and the freckles stood out on his face.

"Pat's got a horn drooped, Rube," said Harve. "Better git yourself a bottle and hit the trail for camp. You heard the saloonman say he'd just swamped out the place. On your way outa town stop at the store and git a cake of soap and use it. Git along, Rube."

Rube got a bottle and left. There was an ugly thrust to his lantern jaw, and a dangerous look in his pale bloodshot eyes.

"Anybody else want to sell what dogies they got in Waldron's Round W road iron?" Pat Drennan asked flatly. "Because I'm loppin' off no more cattle in any man's iron. And I'm goin' on up the trail to Dodge with my stuff and Harve's and Mal's."

"There's a bounty on your scalp at Dodge, Pat," said one of the men. "Bat Masterson is town marshal. You'll git a six-shooter pay-off on your cattle."

"That'll be my worry. You sellin' out here?"

"If Harve and Maw is willin' to gamble on you," said the man, "I'll string my bets with theirs and yourn. Hell, I stole them things in my iron, anyhow. I got nothin' to lose but the other feller's steers."

They had a drink and Pat Drennan said he reckoned he'd better get that diggin' spade and get Big-Mouth Binter planted.

"I shoulda made Rube bury his pardner," he added. "Him and Binter was two of a kind."

Maw McKenzie asked Pat Drennan if he was going back to the outfit, and the red-headed cowpuncher said he was.

"I was tryin' to hire the Harve feller," said Maw. "Waldron is goin' to deal you dirt, Pat. You could do with a pardner like this Harve."

"You done hired a cowboy," said Harve.

CHAPTER TWO

"You're a White Man!"

BURT WALDRON was bedding down his trail herd, fighting his ugly temper, cussing the name of Maw McKenzie, and threatening to shoot the old trail boss when he did show up.

It was getting dusk and the herd was bedding down slowly when Waldron sighted the drive of cattle coming. There

was over two hundred head of cattle in the drive. Maw McKenzie, Pat Drennan and a young, black-haired cowhand, who was leading a pack horse carrying his tarp-covered bed, let the drive of cattle spread and drift slowly along to merge with the bedded trail herd.

Waldron's ugly anger had turned to scowling bewilderment, then to a wolfish grin. He rode out to meet the three men.

"We penned 'em back yonder," said Maw McKenzie, motioning towards the new cattle, "and branded 'em in the Round W road-iron. Figgered there was no use chousin' the whole herd around tomorrow-next day, brandin' these strays that wants to git to Dodge City."

There was a mixture of greed, suspicion and pleasure stamped on Waldron's dark face.

"Mebbyso, Drennan," he said, "I bin bearin' down a mite hard on you. Binter was your pardner, kinda, and he was ornery to git along with. I hated like hell to have to git shut of Binter thataway."

"I could see that," grinned the red headed Drennan, "from where I was settin' my horse."

"You won't have no such trouble," said Maw McKenzie, nodding toward the black-haired cowhand, "with Harve, here. He's awful peaceable, Harve Jones or Smith. Don't matter. Call 'im Harve."

Maw went on to say that he hired only one man because he figured that by the time Pat Drennan got back to camp with these strays they'd picked up along the way, things would be quieted down all around.

As they rode up to the rope corral to unsaddle and throw off Harve's bed, the Round W tough cowhands looked them over. The cowpunchers not out with the herd were squatted around on their hunkers smoking.

One of them got to his feet, his narrowed eyes fixed on Harve. Then without a word he jerked his gun from its holster.

Harve's six-shooter spat fire as he shot from hip-level. The Round W man's gun went off, its heavy .45 slug tearing up dirt between Harve's widespread legs. The Round W cowpuncher's legs gave way at the knees. He was dead before he slumped to the ground.

Pat Drennan's gun was in his hand and his eyes were green and hard.

There was a heavy silence as the echoes died. Burt Waldron's hand was on his six-shooter butt, and his bloodshot glance cut from Harve to Pat Drennan.

"Pat bought a diggin' spade in town," Maw McKenzie's voice broke the silence. "It's tied on Harve's bed. If a couple of you boys will dig a hole, me'n Harve and Pat will eat us a bait of supper."

"That," "explained Harve, his gun in his hand, "was an old personal defugalty between me'n that feller. No call for anybody to take chips in the game. . . . or is there?"

Nobody seemed inclined to take up the argument. Harve ejected the empty shell from his six-shooter and shoved in a fresh cartridge. In the light of the campfire his eyes were as bright and hard as new steel.

They looked at Harve with cold respect. The Round W man had drawn his gun first, and the tall, black-haired young stranger had used his six-shooter with a swiftness too fast for their eyes to follow.

As Pat Drennan helped Harve get his bed off the pack horse, Burt Waldron eyed the pair with cold suspicion. Then he walked over to Maw McKenzie.

"Them two fellers act like they knowed one another, McKenzie. Who is this Harve gent?"

"Ain't that a comical sort of question to ask about a man you hire in the strip called No Man's Land? You sent me to town to hire a tough cowhand. Harve seems to be doin' fair to middlin'."

Burt Waldron scowled. "That's the first bunch of strays you've helped throw into the herd, McKenzie."

Maw's puckered blue eyes looked up from under the slanted brim of his battered old hat.

"That's a fact," he drawled. He turned and walked over to the Dutch ovens to get his supper.

They buried the dead man and sat around smoking in an uneasy silence. Pat Drennan and Harve managed to be near one another. Maw told Harve that he could go on last guard with Pat Drennan. That they would be on that same last guard the rest of the week.

When it came time to turn in, Pat and Harve spread their beds side by side and Maw unrolled his tarp-covered bed near theirs. Off across the prairie a coyote yapped dismally at the moon.

Sleep came slowly to Maw McKenzie. He smoked a last cigarette, then lay on his back looking up at the stars, thinking. . . .

★

THAT day back at Verde, Pat Drennan and Harve had put it to him with a quiet finality. They told him that the Round W trail herd had picked up too many cattle north of the Red River—cattle that wore a brand they called the Quien Sabe, made by joining three half circles.

The brand, Pat Drennan said, belonged to him and Harve and their partner, a cowpuncher called Malcolm. They had a little cow outfit in the strip. But like the other men Maw McKenzie had met there at Verde, they were sort of on the dodge, and so they had no way of trailing their cattle to any market like Dodge City for fear of being picked up by the Law. And so they had been in the habit of making a dicker with the trail boss of some drive going north to sell their cattle on commission.

They had their round-up made and their steers cut out and had been waiting for some friendly trail-boss to come along when Burt Waldron and his sticky trail herd came up out of Texas in a blaze of gun-fire.

The Round W cowhands had gathered some of their Quien Sabe steers, as well as more stray stuff that belonged to Rube and those other renegade cowmen. Rube and some of the others had voted for stopping the Round W trail herd at Verde, to make a Winchester cut on their cattle.

Then Pat Drennan had decided to ride to Doan's Crossing and hire out to the Round W outfit and see how the sign was for a fight at Verde.

And last night when Pat and Binter rode into town from last guard, Pat Drennan had told Harve and the others that Waldron had twice as many cowpunchers as the average trail herd ordinarily used to go north. And that Waldron's cowhands were hand-picked for their toughness and were drawing fighting wages. He figured it that the No Man's Land outfit would lose, even as those Texicans south of the Red had lost. The best bet was for the No Man's Land outfit to let Waldron pick up their cattle and put 'em in the Round W road iron. Then they'd cold-trail the Round W trail herd till the sign was right to make a killing.

Harve had agreed. Malcolm was off on some sort of a lone pasear. Pat Drennan and Binter rode back to the outfit. Loud-Mouth Binter, drunk on Verde rotgut booze, had told Pat that he aimed to crowd Burt Waldron into a gun-fight and kill him, regardless. But Binter had left his saddle gun in the bed wagon, and Waldron had made his Winchester killing.

"We're willin' to tell you this, Maw," Pat Drennan had said, "because I've told Harve and the boys here that you're a white man and that you've got no use

for Burt Waldron. And you'll keep your mouth shut and take no sides. I'll tip you off when the big show is about to happen, and you kin ride away from it.

"When it's all over but the hollerin', you kin show up. And we'll hire you to take the trail herd on to Dodge City and sell our steers. We kin trust you not to double-cross us. And you kin take your own big cut of the Waldron cattle.

"All but Rube and two-three more fellers that ain't much account nohow, is willin' to deal you in. I reckon Malcolm won't put up ary holler. Mal and Harve and me is pardners. What goes for one, goes for all three of us Quien Sabe gents. You want it, Maw?"

Maw McKenzie had tried to keep his voice steady and careless. "What kind of a lookin' feller is your pardner Malcolm?"

"Tall, tow-headed gent," said Pat Drennan, "with blue eyes. No bellerin' about Mal. Quiet. He'll take a lot off any man. But when he starts, he's a warthog."

"You boys has hired a trail boss," Maw McKenzie told Pat Drennan and Harve. "When the showdown comes, mebbyso you kin deal me in. You kin leave it up to your pardner Malcolm."

And it had been at Maw McKenzie's suggestion that they gather what strays Waldron's men had missed, put them in the Round W road iron, and throw them in that evening with the trail herd. . . .

Maw McKenzie was still wide awake, thinking of his son Malcolm, near midnight when he saw the shadowy form of Burt Waldron slip in behind the bed wagon. Waldron crouched there with his saddle gun, waiting for a couple of tough cowhands to come in off third guard.

Maw McKenzie's bed was spread in behind a little brush patch. He slipped from under his tarp and blankets. Without pulling on his pants or boots, he buckled on his cartridge belt and six-shooter. He had to make a slow and cautious circle to get in behind Waldron.

The two men on third guard were coming in. And with them rode two men who should have stayed out there, until the four men booked for last guard got out to the herd.

Waldron was crouched in behind the wagon, gripping his saddle gun. Maw McKenzie was squatting on his sock heels within fifty feet of the big Texan. His voice when he spoke, was his habitual soft Texas drawl, but it held a chilling note.

"Whatever's on your mind, Waldron, better forget it. And don't point that murderin' gun of yourn this way, or I'll shoot you between the horns."

Burt Waldron straightened slowly and stood beside the rear wheel of the bed wagon, his carbine in the crook of his arm.

"I heard horsebackers," he growled, "This is tough country. I'm takin' no chances on bein' slipped up on. What the hell you doin' awake?"

"Takin' no chances, like you said, Waldron, of bein' slipped up on and shot in my bed. Me or any other man I hire." Maw raised his voice a little.

"Third guard a-comin' in. You go on, Pat. You and Harve."

Waldron groped around in the jockey-box of the bed wagon and found a bottle. He took a big drink and put the bottle back. Then walked out to meet the three riders.

"Take 'er easy, boys," he said. "No bets laid."

Burt Waldron walked back to his bed. The big owner of the Round W iron was in his sock feet. Maw grinned.

"Walk careful, Waldron," he chuckled softly, "or you'll step on a mess of sand burrs like I done."

The three men off third guard covertly eased six-shooters back into their holsters. But Maw had seen. And Pat Drennan and Harve had seen. Maw said he reckoned he'd ride on out to the herd with Pat and Harve. That he'd drunk too much coffee and couldn't sleep.

As they rode out to the bedded herd Pat Drennan grinned widely.

"First I sighted Waldron, and poked Harve. Then you come Injunin' around the brush. I damn near got to laughin'. . . . You're a white man, Maw!"

CHAPTER THREE

When Gun-Ghosts Ride Again

MAW McKENZIE had it figured out that Waldron had given those four men orders to kill Pat Drennan and Harve that night. And if those four tough hands couldn't get the job done, then he—Burt Waldron—would go to work with that carbine of his. And if Maw McKenzie stepped out of line, he'd get a .30-30 slug where it would do the most good.

But Waldron had been sort of caught off balance. The black-haired, Injun-eyed Texan was plain poison with that saddle gun of his, the trail boss told Pat Drennan and Harve, but he liked to have all the bulge when he used it. Waldron was a killer who never took chances if he could help it.

"Yellow," said Pat Drennan.

"Yeah," nodded Maw McKenzie, "and on the other hand, nope. He likes to kill without takin' ary chance of stoppin' lead hisself. Like he shot Binter. But if he gits crowded he'll shore put up a fight. In the fight south of the Red he done most of the killin'. And he didn't waste bullets or hide behind his tough cowhands. In a tight, Burt Waldron is tougher than any half dozen men in his outfit. He's a hard man to shave, boys."

They asked Maw just who Burt Waldron was, where he came from, what part of Texas.

Maw McKenzie said he didn't know. That he had showed up down along the San Saba country with some of his tough cowpunchers and a bunch of Mexican cattle, two-three years ago. He had made a tough rep for himself with that Winchester he packed. Some claimed that Burt Waldron wasn't his name at all. That he had come from the Indian Territory on the prowl and had been mixed up in the Wire Cutter War in Texas under another name. Others said he had been a hired killer and had bought cattle with the bounty money he collected on men he had murdered. He never traveled into town without one or two or more of his tough cowhands. And there was always the rumor that he had been warned by the Captain of the Texas Rangers to take his cattle and get out of Texas.

"He told me that he had never bin up the Western Trail to Dodge City," said

Maw McKenzie. "Said he needed a trail boss that had bin through this country north of Texas. But Waldron lied there. He knows this country as well as I do. I bin watchin' him, and he's bin up this cattle trail before. He knows where to camp, where to water the herd, how far it is between water and where we have to dry camp. Burt Waldron has bin up this cattle trail."

"Then why did he hire you, Maw?" asked Pat Drennan.

"You got me there, son. I bin tryin' to figger out why he's bin payin' me big wages that I don't earn. I taken no part in the fightin'."

This was the first time Maw McKenzie had voiced the question which had been puzzling him a lot. Waldron needed no trail boss to pilot him and his stolen cattle up the Western Trail. And Maw had made it plain at the start that he had no intention of trying to earn fighting wages. But Waldron said he had a whole damned crew of tough-hands to do the gun-slinging. That he was hiring Maw to handle his trail herd and pilot the way north to Dodge City.

Maw told Pat Drennan and Harve that he reckoned he'd find out some day why he had been hired.

Harve said he wondered why Waldron had taken a notion to murder him and Pat Drennan tonight. The big cowman had seemed friendly enough when they showed up with that bunch of cattle after sundown.

Maw said Waldron was treacherous, drunk or sober. That he had gotten sort of suspicious because Pat and Harve seemed to know each other too well. And Harve killing that Round W cowhand hadn't set any too good with Waldron.

"I had to kill that feller," Harve said flatly, "before he killed me."

Maw McKenzie nodded and said that had been plain enough for even Waldron to savvy.

"That man I had to kill," Harve added, "was the only man in this outfit who knowed my real name."

Maw McKenzie knew better than to ask any questions and so they rode on to the herd in silence.

There should have been a fourth man on last guard with them and Harve wondered where that fourth man was.

Pat Drennan grinned faintly and looked at Maw.

"You killed him off, Maw said quietly.

They had reached the herd when they saw a man riding from camp to join them on last guard. As he came closer Maw McKenzie spoke.

"I told you Burt Waldron wasn't exactly yellow. That's him, a-comin' to stand last guard with us!"

Waldron was cussing in an undertone as he rode up. Cussing his fighting crew for a coyote pack.

"They're leary of that gun of yourn, Harve," Waldron's big yellow teeth bared in that wolfish grin of his. "Nary man wanted to stand guard with you three fellers. Me'n Maw will ride around one way. Drennan, you and Harve ride around the other way. You kin ride together," he added, slapping his saddle gun, "if you're scairt of this."

"We don't ride in pairs," grinned Pat Drennan, "but if that saddle gun was to go off and kill Maw McKenzie, it would spook these cattle. And long before these cattle in the Round W road iron was gathered again, the buzzards and coyotes would have the bones of Burt Waldron scattered."

The red-headed cowpuncher's green eyes glinted. His grin was wide. He and Harve rode off.

Maw McKenzie and Burt Waldron rode half way around the bedded herd in silence. The cattle were laying good. Two men could have held them on a night like this.

Waldron acted like a man who had

something on his mind but did not quite know how to put it into the right words. Maw McKenzie rode with his right hand near his six-shooter.

They met Pat Drennan, and Pat would have stopped but Maw motioned with his head and the red-headed cowpuncher rode on. A ways farther on they met Harve. Maw nodded and Harve rode on. Pat Drennan was singing a doleful tune to the bedded cattle, and Harve's song had something of the same sad wail.

Cowpuncher songs, sung to a bedded herd to let the cattle know that men and horses were riding around on guard. Let a man ride up at a trot or lope and the cattle might spook. Strike a match, and your herd might be up and gone. Sing to 'em and they lay better on the bed ground. And a cowboy's song is a part of his life.

They were lonely songs about gray haired mothers who wait for wayward sons. Songs of death and outlaw cowhands. Songs of lost love and dreams that can never come true.

Pat Drennan had a clear, plaintive Irish lilt to his song. Harve's singing was a little off key and he sang the same verse over and over to the same dismal tune.

Harve sang:

"One of these days
And it won't be long,
You'll look for me
And I'll be gone."

Waldron's big teeth showed and he broke the silence between him and the old trail boss.

" 'One of these days, and it won't be long,' McKenzie. And you'll earn them wages I bin a-payin' you. You needn't be scairt of this saddle gun of mine. I need you too bad. I'll want you ridin' right up on the point when this trail herd reaches Dodge City."

Then Waldron rode on ahead at a long running walk, humming tunelessly.

Maw McKenzie rode alone with his hopes and his fears with him, rode with the firm conviction that he was playing some sort of an ignorant part in a mighty dangerous and deep game that he did not understand.

And he felt sure—that as sure as his name was McKenzie, his son Malcom was banking this dangerous game. But that Burt Waldron had an ace in the hole and was betting all his chips. . . .

★

LONG days dragged in sun and dust as the trail herd in the Round W road iron gathered more strays.

"Keep 'em a-walkin' north!" sang Burt Waldron.

The No Man's Land outfit was cold-trailing them like a wolf pack, and now and then one of that outfit would be sighted in the distance.

One night on guard, a man rode up out of the night and circled the herd with Harve and Pat Drennan a couple of times, talking. Then he rode away as mysteriously as he had come.

"Rube," Pat Drennan told Maw, when the rider had gone, "has split away from the rest of us. He taken half a dozen fellers with him. Rube's treacherous. Malcom sent word to be on the lookout for ary trouble he might make. Rube is ornery enough to throw in with Waldron, just to work out his grudge ag'in' the Quien Sabe. But he won't show up by daylight. He's dead scairt of Harve and me. Rube will meet Burt Waldron in the dark of a night."

"Did your pardner Malcom send ary word?" Maw McKenzie tried to keep the anxiety out of his voice.

"Yeah. He did. He said to tell you he was dealin' you in on the showdown. To give you his regards."

Old Maw McKenzie rode the rest of that two hours guard with a smile on his

leathery face and his blue eyes as shiny as the stars. He'd be seeing Malcolm soon.

Maw McKenzie saw his son a lot sooner than he hoped for. But not as he had expected to see him. . . .

Maw's job as trail boss kept him with the herd every night until it was bedded down, then he'd ride to camp in the early starlight.

This evening as he rode towards the water hole where the wagons were camped, Pat Drennan rode out to meet him.

"Malcolm is at camp, Maw. He sent me out to warn you. You never seen him before." And Pat Drennan rode back.

Malcolm McKenzie was standing there at the edge of the campfire, a cup of coffee in his hand. His tow-colored hair needed trimming and there was a two week's growth of dusty sand-colored whiskers on his lean jaws. Tiny wrinkles puckered the corners of his eyes. Only Malcolm's eyes had not changed with the hard, tough years. They were sky blue and reckless and young.

Malcolm McKenzie looked straight at his father without a sign of recognition. But his eyes seemed to mist a little and grow brighter. Then he turned his head and went on talking to the Injun-haired Burt Waldron.

"Like I was sayin', mister," Malcolm McKenzie's voice was a shade deeper, a little firmer than Maw remembered, "I heard that a man named Burt Waldron was fetchin' a trail herd north. I'd knowed a man by that name when I was a kid in Texas. So I thought I'd stop and auger with him about old times. . . . But you ain't the same Burt Waldron I knowed. And I'll be travelin' on."

"I had a cousin by the same name," said Burt Waldron, his opaque black eyes studying Malcolm McKenzie. He got killed, I heard, in the Wire Cutters' War down in Texas. What did you say your name was?"

"I didn't say."

Malcolm McKenzie drained the last of his coffee, tossed the empty cup in the dishpan, and walked over to where his saddled horse stood.

For the fraction of a second Malcolm's eyes met those of his father, held like a quick handgrip, then moved on. He got on his horse and rode away.

Burt Waldron stood there, his carbine in the crook of his arm, his black brows pulled in a scowl as he stared after the man who rode away into the gathering twilight.

Maw McKenzie stood back in the shadows beyond the Dutch ovens. His hand on his six-shooter. He was ready to kill the big black haired cowman if the barrel of the carbine moved.

But Waldron paid him no attention. His opaque black eyes had cut a swift glance towards Pat Drennan and Harve. Harve was sitting on the tongue of the chuck wagon, his six-shooter in his hand. He was making out as if he were rubbing the dust from his gun with his black silk neck-scarf but his steel gray eyes were watching Waldron. And leaning against the front wheel of the bed wagon was Pat Drennan.

"Signed On for a Tough Hand!" That was the nameless, hard-bitten youngster called the Outlaw Kid, when he turned his back on the blood-stained Outlaw Trail and made his greatest gamble to live, fight—and die—as an honest cow-puncher! Don't miss this great Walt Coburn novel—"The Saga of the Outlaw Kid," in the current issue of DIME WESTERN! Buy it—read it—today!

The freckled-faced cowpuncher had his forefinger hooked in the trigger guard of his six-shooter and he was spinning the gun carelessly. There was a faint grin on Drennan's sunburned freckled face.

The Round W cowpunchers were watching Waldron curiously. He turned and walked over to his bedroll and got a bottle of whiskey out of his warsack. He tipped it up and drank like a thirsty man drinks water. Then corked the bottle and put it away.

"I'd give a purty," he growled, when he came back to the campfire, "to know who that big tow-headed feller is."

Waldron's swarthy face had looked a little grayish for a minute, but the whiskey drove the blood back into his skin. He rolled a cigarette and lit it and said he was going out with the men on first guard.

"When you meet Rube out there," grinned Pat Drennan, "you could ask him about the big tow-headed feller. Rube might tell you."

Burt Waldron straightened up like he had been slapped. Then his lips flattened back to show his big yellow teeth.

"That's an idee, Drennan," he said harshly, and walked over to where his night horse was tied to the rope corral.

Burton Waldron took his first guard men and rode out to the herd. Maw McKenzie loaded his tin plate with grub and filled his coffee cup.

"Damned if Waldron didn't act like a man that had sighted a ghost," said the cook.

"Or heard the name of a ghost fetched up," grinned Pat Drennan.

"What would you mean by that, Pat?" asked a Round W cowhand.

"That big Winchester boss of yourn," said Harve flatly, "might be travelin' under a dead man's name. Or wouldn't you boys know about that?"

"Let's all stay healthy," Pat Drennan cut in. "It's such a purty evenin'. Like Rube will be tellin' the big Winchester boss about now, the sign ain't right yet. Till she comes right, let's leave the dead ghosts stay buried."

CHAPTER FOUR

Beware of Kansas Law!

THE trail herd camped on the south bank of the Cimarron where it cuts across the Oklahoma-Kansas boundary line. Hugh Waldron called Maw McKenzie to one side for a confidential talk.

Waldron was in a rare good humor but there was something bothering his crafty mind and when he pulled a bottle, Maw knew that the man was going to want something of him and that he wasn't certain Maw McKenzie would see eye to eye with him.

Maw said he'd wait till they had their medicine talk before he took a drink. Then he might or might not drink on it.

"Git it outa your system, Waldron. What's itchin' your hide?"

"North of the Cimarron, McKenzie, somewheres between the Cimarron and the Arkansas River where Bat Masterson is the Law at Dodge City, this trail herd is goin' to be stopped. Masterson has some tough deputies—Pat Garrett, the Earp boys, fellers like that. And they're makin' a cut on all strays. You know Bat Masterson."

"Me and Bat Masterson is old friends, Waldron. If Pat Garrett is workin' with Bat, I know Pat. And if the Earps are workin' with Bat Masterson, I know them plenty well. I've dealt with 'em all and dealt square and they know it."

"So I was told, McKenzie, before ever I hired you. And that's the main reason you're drawin' three times what ary other trail boss gits."

"Go on, Waldron."

"Tomorrow when this cattle drive crosses the Cimarron, we'll be in Kansas. And we kin expect these lawmen to ride up. I'll gun-fight these renegades from No Man's Land and whup 'em till there ain't no more of 'em to fight. But I don't want no ruckus with the Kansas law. I don't aim to lock horns with them lawmen that stop this trail herd for inspection. I had to quit Texas. Oklahoma ain't a healthy climate, either. I want no more run-in with John Law. Savvy, McKenzie?"

Maw McKenzie nodded. "Keep on talkin', Waldron."

"Them John Laws will take your word for it, McKenzie, when you tell 'em that all the strays we've put in the Round W road iron belong to you. That's where you earn your pay."

"I'll see you in hell first, Waldron," said Maw quietly.

"Keep your shirt on. I've talked to Rube. I know that Pat Drennan and Harve and their pardner Malcolm is lettin' their cattle go to Dodge City without a fight because they figure I'll run foul of the law. They aim to put you in charge of this trail herd when John Law jails me for cattle rustlin'. Them Quien Sabe three is hirin' you to represent 'em. Them Quien Sabe cattle is turned over to you. So is half a dozen other stray irons in this trail herd. You got a tally of every one of them brands and how many head of cattle in each iron, in that little tally book of yourn. That tow-headed feller that stopped here is the other Quien Sabe pardner, Malcolm. Rube told me.

"I got it in writin' from Rube and the others that pulled away from the Quien Sabe outfit, that you're reppin' for their brands. So you ain't doin' anything that ain't straight and plumb legal. All you got to do is tell Bat Masterson's lawmen that you're the trail boss in charge of this outfit. That you're the big dog with the brass collar. That you've got the legal right to sell every head of cattle in the Round W road-iron. The lawmen will pass the herd. And with 'em will be the cattle buyers I'm dealin' with.

"Them cattle buyers will have the money on 'em to lay on the barrel-head. I've already made the dicker with 'em. Their cowpunchers will take over the trail herd at the point of inspection. They take the cattle, I git the cash. You git paid off big money and ride away. Whatever argument Pat Drennan and Harve and this Malcolm puts up, me and my men will take it up with 'em. That's the deal. That's your job."

Maw McKenzie had to think fast. "You aim to be where, Waldron, when the Law stops your Round W trail herd?"

Waldron's yellow teeth showed. "Somewheres outa sight, McKenzie. Somewheres outa gun-range of them Law fellers, on the Oklahoma side of the Cimarron. When this trail herd crosses the river in the mornin', she's all yourn."

Maw McKenzie didn't like the man's wolfish grin or the cunning glint in his opaque black eyes. Waldron had taken two of his tough cowhands that morning and ridden on ahead. He wanted to see how long a day's drive it was to the Cimarron, he'd said, and to make certain no other trail herd was camped there on water.

It had been nearly sundown and the cattle were already being spread out to prevent a pile-up at the river, when Waldron and his two gun-slingers crossed the Cimarron from the Kansas side, their horses showing signs of having been ridden hard.

Now Maw McKenzie made a shrewd guess and put it into words.

"Kansas Law is ridin' thisaway, Waldron?"

Waldron nodded. "You're nobody's damned fool, McKenzie. I sighted their outfit a-comin'. I look for 'em to be camped on yonder side of the Cimarron

when daybreak shows their breakfast fire."

His wolfish grin widened. "Right here, mister, is as far as some of us dare go with these cattle. I ain't crossin' into Kansas. That goes for Pat Drennan and Harve. And for their partner Malcolm wherever he is, cold trailin' us. It goes for Rube and his renegades. And for about half my crew of tough cowhands. All of us will stay on the Oklahoma side of the Cimarron. You'll be a little short handed when you point these cattle into Kansas."

"You said your cattle buyers would take delivery where the Law inspected and passed this herd?"

"They'll be Johnny on the spot. They got a crew of men to take the cattle. And they'll pay you cash money, McKenzie."

"You kin pull the cork on your likker, Waldron. It's a deal."

They had a drink together and Waldron corked his bottle. He slapped the stock of the carbine he carried in the crook of his arm.

"Don't get ary notion of ridin' off with all that money, McKenzie. Some of my cowhands will be with you. They'll haze you back into Winchester range."

Waldron turned and walked away. He got his horse and rode off towards where the herd was bedded, taking his two toughest cowhands with him.

★

WHEN Maw McKenzie walked back to the dying supper fire to get himself a cup of coffee he noticed that both Pat Drennan and Harve were not among the cowpunchers who sat talking around the campfire.

Maw felt uneasy and restless. Waldron had told his men that Maw was taking the trail herd across the Cimarron in the morning and the ones who were going with him were hoorawing the others because they dared not cross into Kansas.

Maw and Pat Drennan and Harve were booked for third guard and due to go on at midnight. Maw dozed and kept waking. Pat's and Harve's beds were rolled.

Waldron and his two men rode in sometime during second guard and Waldron was cussing and ugly tempered. He walked over to Pat's and Harve's rolled beds and stared at them, muttering something to himself. Then he got his bottle and sat on the tongue of the bed wagon and nibbled at it, his carbine across his knees.

Maw heard Pat Drennan and Harve riding up and he called out quietly. "Take it easy, Waldron."

Waldron growled something and stood up. Pat and Harve rode up, halted their horses there.

"Shore a purty moon," grinned Pat Drennan.

Maw McKenzie heard Waldron grunt and then walk over to his bed. Harve said they might as well go on guard and Maw pulled on his pants and boots and they rode out towards the herd. They had nearly an hour yet before midnight when their guard time began.

When they were out of sight of camp Harve and Pat Drennan turned off at an angle and Maw went with them. They circled out around the bedded herd and rode down the river a ways to an old corral Maw had noticed when they spread the herd out on water.

The corral had a pole gate and the gate posts stood about twenty feet high with a pole cross bar connecting them at the top. Harve and Pat Drennan reined up and Maw pulled his horse to a halt.

A dead man was hanging from the cross pole, and in the moonlight his face showed swollen and black from strangulation. But in spite of the disfiguration Maw McKenzie recognized the hanged man. It was the yellow whiskered Rube. And pinned to his shirt was a large square

sheet of paper with something printed on it.

"It's for the feller who goes by the name of Burt Waldron," said Pat Drennan. "He'll see it when he rides down the river in the mornin', to hide out from the Kansas Law."

"What Malcolm wrote there," said Harve, "wouldn't make sense to nobody but the feller who calls himself Burt Waldron."

"You boys," said Maw McKenzie, "know who Malcolm is?"

"Yes, sir," said Pat Drennan. "He told us you was his father."

"But you don't feel like tellin' me why this Rube feller was hung."

"Nor why we never shed no tears at Binter's grave," said Pat Drennan. "Malcom would rather you'd wait till he told you, hisself."

"After this Injun-lookin' killer that calls himself Burt Waldron is roped, throwed and hogtied," said Harve.

"Malcolm says not to kill him," said Pat Drennan. "Otherwise me or Harve would have gut-shot the big Injun way back yonder."

They sat their horses and stared at the hanged man, then they rode on to the herd to go on third guard.

Maw McKenzie told them about the proposition Waldron had put to him and that he was taking the herd across the Cimarron in the morning. They said that's the way they had figured Waldron would play it because he was scared to meet Bat Masterson or any of Masterson's deputies.

"How about you boys?"

"Waldron will fetch his whole crew out on last guard," said Pat Drennan. "You'll be safe enough to play 'er lone handed from there. He shore won't harm you because you're his ace in the hole. But when they ride out to the herd, me'n Harve will be gone."

They rode around the herd. On the far side of the river Maw McKenzie heard the sounds of wagon wheels, men on horseback, and camp being made. A little remuda of horses was watered at the river's edge and shoved back again to graze. A campfire blazed into being. Men on foot and others on horseback moved around the camp on the far bank of the Cimarron.

That, Pat Drennan said, would be the

FIGHTING MEN ALL!

From the bloody and glorious time of the Alamo, through the heroic stand at Adobe Walls, down to the present time when Westerners are doing their share in hand-to-hand fighting in the South Pacific you'll find in your real Westerner the proud red blood of all Frontiersmen.

That fighting tradition is presented nowhere more dramatically than in the rugged fiction of *Star Western.*

Next issue features such smashing novels as "Powder and Ball for General Crook" by Dee Linford, "Gambler's Midnight Deadline," a Nero Jones novel by Robert E. Mahaffay, a Tom Roan saga of frontier, and other unforgettable long stories.

Buy your copy of the May issue April 3rd!

STAR WESTERN

ALL STORIES NEW ALL STORIES COMPLETE

Law making camp—the cattle buyers and their cowpunchers.

Then before two o'clock in the morning when the last guard was due to come on, Maw McKenzie sighted Burt Waldron and all his tough cowhands riding towards the bedded herd.

Pat Drennan's clear Irish voice had quit singing. From beyond the far side of the herd, Harve's off-key dismal refrain drifted back to the little old trail boss and faded away in the distance:

"One of these days
And it won't be long,
You'll look for me
And I'll be gone!"

CHAPTER FIVE

Bullet-Market for Stolen Beef

WALDRON'S cowpunchers spread out and circled the herd, and after a few minutes Maw McKenzie heard Burt Waldron cussing because they could not locate Pat Drennan and Harve. And Maw knew that they had planned to kill those two cowpunchers.

But Waldron, a little drunk and uneasy and nibbling at his bottle to dull the edge of his nerves, had his anger and disappointment fairly well under control by the time he met Maw McKenzie.

"I had 'er made to kill them two renegades," he admitted openly, "but I mighta knowed they'd rabbit on me. . . . Just as well. Shootin' would shore spook these cattle. I'll git 'em when the sign is right. I'll git them two sons, and their pardner Malcolm. And git this into your calculations, McKenzie. If you double-cross me ary way, I got a bullet with your name on it."

Burt Waldron was uneasy and impatient for daybreak. At the first sign of breaking day he was moving the cattle off the bedground and stringing them out for the shallow crossing. And in the gray light of dawn Maw McKenzie made out the riders waiting on the far side of the river. He and Waldron rode up on the point, and with the expert aid of the swing men they got the cattle started across the strip of shallow gray water. It was too early in the morning for the cattle to be dry and they were stringing out and splashing across with a lot less trouble than the old trail boss hoped for.

"Big pot-gutted feller named Zeke Swane and a little dried up runt called Lew Cleeter will be takin' delivery," said Waldron. "Ride over on the point and tally 'em over. I'll keep 'em a-comin' acrost and strung out so's you kin count 'em. Pay no attention to them law fellers till the last of the drags is counted acrost the river. Then make your deal with Bat Masterson's men. . . . Tell Swane and Cleeter to fetch the money over to the old brandin' corral down the river on this side. They'll find me there. So will you, McKenzie, if you expect your pay-off."

Maw McKenzie nodded and rode on across in the lead of the cattle. It was full dawn now and you could read the brands and earmarks on the cattle.

There was light enough to make out the big paunchy bulk of Zeke Swane and the weazened little Lew Cleeter. They sat their horses back from the river at vantage points that would let the cattle string out between them for a count. Their men were stationed along the river bank and beyond to take over the herd.

As Maw McKenzie's horse splashed ashore a tall man with graying black moustache and small goatee rode up. And the old trail boss' heart quickened its beat.

There was no mistaking that tall rawboned rider. He was Captain Lee Prouty, of the Texas Rangers. The man who had ridden to the little ranch on the Nueces to tell Maw McKenzie that his son Malcom was an outlaw. The same Captain Lee Prouty who had accepted Maw McKenzie's bitter resignation from the Rang-

ers. And from that day until now the two men had not met.

"Long time no see," said Lee Prouty. He made no move to shake hands. The casual drawl of his voice told Maw McKenzie nothing.

"Kinda off your home range, ain't you, Cap?"

"Yeah. You're the Round W trail boss?"

Maw's blue eyes chilled. "I'm kinda jiggerin' the spread." He lifted his voice to a shout, calling out to the two cattle buyers.

"You two fellers pickin' up the tally?"

They motioned that they were. Maw McKenzie lifted his hand a little and began lopping off his count.

"Five . . . ten . . . fifteen . . . twenty. . . ."

"Them two crooks," Captain Lee Prouty of the Rangers interrupted the old trail boss, "will tally out your herd without makin' ary mistake. This is the first time in their dirty lives that pair ever tried hard to make an honest count on cattle. I taken 'em acrost the river about daybreak and showed 'em that Rube feller a-hangin' to the corral gate. . . . You got a list of stray brands and the tally in each iron?"

"Down to the last dogie. Want to check 'em as they go past?"

"We'll go through the motions," said the Ranger captain. That'll keep Waldron's a-watchin' us. That's him settin' that big appaloosa horse, ain't it?"

Burt Waldron was on the far bank, keeping the cattle strung out, riding back and forth with his saddle gun in the crook of his arm and shouting profane orders to his men.

"That's Waldron," said Maw McKenzie grimly. "Is these your men takin' delivery?"

"Nope. They're a crew of cowpunchers Swane and Cleeter picked up around Dodge, I reckon."

"You ain't workin' alone here, Cap?"

★

CAPTAIN LEE PROUTY looked hard at Maw McKenzie and grinned faintly. "To tell you the truth," he drawled. "I'm damned if I know. Me'n you wasn't exactly smokin' the same pipe the last time we met. You was on the prod."

"You'd sent my only son out to play a damn sneakin' detective in that Fence Cutter War. Give him orders to throw in with them damned wire-cuttin' killers. Told him to play their game, git drunk with 'em, butcher somebody's beef and play tough. Him and two other Rangers. His two pardners git bushwhacked and killed after a big dance where they all got drunk as part of their job. Then some damned lyin' son of a snake sends in word that my boy Malcolm done the killin'. I told you then, Lee Prouty, and I'm a-tellin' you now, that if that's the way the Ranger outfit stands behind one of their men, I don't want a damned thing in do with such a layout!"

"You pick a hell of a time," said Ranger Captain Lee Prouty, "and a hell of a place to repeat that paw and beller. I got you dead to rights with a trail herd that left Texas with less than three thousand head and will tally out better'n thirty five hundred here on the banks of the Cimarron. Half the stray irons in No Man's Land in your Round W iron. And Waldron stole the bulk of the original herd that left Texas. And you're the trail boss! Yeah, you shore pick a fine time and place to tell a Texas Ranger to go to hell!"

"You're workin' alone?" snapped Maw McKenzie.

"I'm the only law officer on the job," said Lee Prouty. "And off my home range, at that."

"Then it looks to me," said Maw, "like it's you that's picked a bad mornin'."

The lanky old Ranger Captain nodded. "Waldron's cuttin' a hard eye acrost the river. Make out we're tallyin' these stray brands. We got to keep that big son amused till the last drags is acrost. Git out that tally book of yourn. Act like you was workin' at your trail boss job."

Maw McKenzie was puzzled. He and Lee Prouty checked stray brands for half an hour. Swane and Cleeter kept tallying the string of moving cattle. On the other side of the river Burt Waldron and his tough crew worked at their job. They might be gun-slingers, but they were cowhands and good 'uns, Lee Prouty admitted. And when Waldron was not watching their side of the river the lanky Ranger told Maw they could rest a spell. That he didn't give a damn how many stray irons there was in the Round W road iron.

"Them Quien Sabe boys," he told Maw, "owns 'em all, anyhow."

"You mean—?"

"Your boy Malcolm and his two pardners. They bought out the others. And them that showed fight, they taken care of. Pat Drennan let Waldron kill Binter. And they hung that Rube feller by moonlight. They git their job done in their own way."

Maw McKenzie didn't know what to say. He figured it was a good time to keep his mouth shut. Only a fool talks when he should be listening.

The last of the cattle was across. Waldron's men had come no further than the middle of the river at any time. Now they rode back and joined Waldron.

Ranger Captain Lee Prouty nodded to Maw and they rode over to where Zeke Swane and his partner Lew Cleeter sat their horses. Swane's beefy face was a mottled, sickly color. The weazened Cleeter's eyes shifted like those of a trapped coyote.

"What's your tally?" asked Captain Lee Prouty.

"Three thousand, five hundred and eighty-two head." Swane's voice was a harsh, croaking whisper.

"Pay McKenzie," said the Ranger flatly. "He's the Round W trail boss."

"The a g r e e m e n t," Cleeter's voice creaked dismally, "was that we pay Burt Waldron on the other side of the river. At the—"

"At the corral where I showed you what happened to one man that broke the law I'm paid to enforce!"

Swane and Cleeter exchanged quick, harassed looks. Then they handed Maw McKenzie two canvas sacks that bulged with currency and gold coin.

"I helped 'em count it this mornin'," said Lee Prouty. "There's enough to pay for the trail herd. Take it."

Maw McKenzie tied the two canvas sacks of money on his saddle. Ranger Captain Lee Prouty spoke to the two badly scared cattle buyers.

"This is the last bunch of stolen cattle you two things will ever buy in this cow-country. Trail 'em to Dodge City. They're inspected and passed and paid for. Ship 'em. Then pay off your men and quit the country. There'll be a bounty on your mangy hides if ever you return."

The Ranger Captain reined his horse and nodded to Maw McKenzie. "Come along, Maw. Them three Quien Sabe boys will be needin' us. And we'll be needin' them when we meet Waldron at the corral."

★

THE sun was an hour high when Maw McKenzie and Lee Prouty forded the Cimarron.

"What in hell," asked Maw McKenzie, "is the game, anyhow?"

"It ain't my game," admitted the Ranger Captain. Malcolm McKenzie is doin' the dealin'. His two Texican pardners is sidin' him. Ain't he told you?"

I ain't talked to Malcolm in five years," said Maw. "I seen him once. Pat Drennan and Harve showed me that hanged man, Rube."

"Malcolm McKenzie rode back to Texas a week, ten days ago. He told me to throw in with Swane and Cleeter's outfit here. Make out I was inspectin' the Round W trail herd for stray brands. And then last night them three young rascals invited me acrost the Cimarron to a hangin'. It wasn't purty. And mebbyso it wasn't legal. But they hung one of the men that bushwhacked two Rangers about five years ago, durin' the fence cutter trouble. And before this Rube was strung up he told it all.

"There was three hired killers in on it. Binter was one. Rube was another. And the man that killed a rancher named Burt Waldron and drove his cattle outa Texas and up the trail to the Cimarron where he sold 'em to Swane and Cleeter, is the third bushwhacker. He'd taken the name of Burt Waldron after he murdered Waldron.

"The real Burt Waldron was the big rancher who made the big holler five years ago for the Texas Rangers to put a stop to the renegades that was cuttin' his big pasture fences.

"I sent Ranger Malcom McKenzie and two more Rangers to report to Waldron and see what they could do.

"After two Rangers was killed and Ranger Malcolm McKenzie woke up from too much corn likker—that like as not had bin doped—he found hisself accused of murder. Then after Malcolm got outa the country a few jumps ahead of the wire cutters' hang-mob, I git another letter. It's signed Burt Waldron. And it cussed out the Rangers and said that he was quittin' Texas and headin' someplace where he'd find law to protect him.

"It wasn't the real Waldron who wrote that last letter. It was the feller who killed Burt Waldron and stole his name and his brand and all the horses and cattle in that Round W brand.

"Malcolm McKenzie trailed the three bushwhackers into No Man's Land. They'd never seen him to know him. And with him he taken two Texas cowpunchers who had good reason to hate the three bushwhacker killers. Pat Drennan's brother was one of the Rangers that got killed. And Harvey Prouty's brother was the other murdered Ranger."

"Harvey *Prouty?*"

"My son. My other son Dave was killed by them wire cutters."

"Gawdamighty, Lee! I didn't know. I didn't know you had ary sons."

"You never give me much of a chance to tell you. You and me come from different parts of Texas. Didn't know much about one another's families. And that's water that's gone under the bridge. Yonder's the game we're settin' into now. Malcolm McKenzie played it lone-handed up till a year ago. Then he sent word to me to say nothin' to you, but to send him two men to throw in with him on his Quien Sabe ranch in No Man's Land. And I sent the two young cowhands who could do him the most good. They're waitin' for us now."

Lee Prouty and Maw McKenzie crossed the river, rode their horses into some brush and pulled up.

The Ranger captain sounded an owl hoot. Three answering echoes came from three separate brush patches.

Then there was a silence and the short wait began. A few minutes later there came the sounds of men on horseback. Waldron and a dozen of his tough cowhands rode into sight.

Ranger Captain Lee Prouty's voice was a low whisper. "Winchester Kavanaugh is his right name. Half-breed Chickasa. The man murdered Burt Waldron and taken his name. Take it easy, McKenzie."

Waldron's rasping voice called out.

"Swane! Cleeter! Come outa the brush!

If you got that white-whiskered McKenzie killed off you git a thousand dollars and—Hell's afire!"

Waldron had sighted the hanged man. He spurred his horse to a lope, his men close behind him. Rode up to where the gruesome corpse swung by its hangman's rope. His slitted bloodshot eyes stared hard at the printing on the paper.

Ranger Captain Lee Prouty called out from behind the brush. "Throw away that Winchester you taken your name from, Kavanaugh! I'm Lee Prouty, Captain of the Texas Rangers. I want you for murderin' my son. Throw it away."

"Come and git it, Ranger!"

Captain Lee Prouty spurred his horse out from behind the brush. Maw McKenzie rode with him and they came out shooting. And at the same moment Pat Drennan, Harve and Malcolm McKenzie charged from the brush.

Waldron and his men had tried to ride into the corral, but their horses spooked at the hanged man. They had not expected an open charge. They were bushwhacker-trained, and used to fighting from the brush. It was beyond their savvy for men to ride out from the shelter of brush to risk their lives against odds out in the open. And the five men who charged against their odds were shooting to kill.

Waldron's men scattered and ran for it, shooting wildly. But there was no getting past the five Texans who were fighting with cold-nerved precision.

Then Waldron's big appaloosa gelding stampeded from the fighting men.

FIVE guns spat fire and by some freak of fate the five shots missed the man. Not exactly a trick of fate, at that, because every one of the Texans had stopped a bullet.

The Ranger captain's horse was down. Harve's gun-arm dangled, and he was shooting left-handed. Pat Drennan's face was blood-smeared from a bullet rip that left him sick and dizzy. And Malcolm's line of fire was blocked by a couple of Round W fighting cowpunchers and his cracked rib was doing his aim no good.

Half a dozen riderless Round W horses were charging and milling around. And through the loose horses Waldron came on his big appaloosa gelding, lying low along the neck of his racing horse, headed for the brush along the river. Between him and the sheltering brush old Maw McKenzie sat his horse, his long-barreled six-shooter in his hand.

Maw McKenzie's puckered blue eyes were cold and hard and bright.

"The big pay-off, Waldron!" he lifted his voice above the rattle of gunfire.

Waldron's big yellow teeth bared. His men were shooting at the fighting Texans. He cut a swift glance across his shoulder and pulled his running horse to a sliding halt, almost colliding with Maw's horse that had—for some perverse reason—balked like a mule. It was spooked or wounded—Maw didn't know which—but his horse had stopped from a run to a dead halt and stood quivering while the guns roared and bullets whined like hornets. It was like a gun-shy bird dog.

Maw McKenzie had jerked loose the saddle strings and grabbed one of the sacks of money. He waved it in his left hand. And Waldron swung his running horse towards the old trail boss, his carbine cocked for the kill.

The big appaloosa caromed into Maw McKenzie's horse with a side swipe. The carbine spewed a short streak of flame and its bullet burned across the old Texan's ribs. Then his wooden-handled six-shooter was roaring, sending its heavy .45 slugs into Waldron's belly and chest, while Maw's horse crouched and quivered and snorted. And the big blue horse with large white spots across its rump, called appaloosa for color, reared and lunged and whirled.

Maw McKenzie sat his balked horse with an empty six-shooter in his hand. He saw Waldron sway drunkenly in his saddle, his eyes glazed, his big yellow teeth showing. A sack of money gripped in one hand, his Winchester clutched in a death grip in the other hand. The man who called himself Burt Waldron was dead before he was thrown.

The killer died with the money he had fought for in one hand, his murdering Winchester in the other hand. And as he crashed to the ground, sprawled on his back with his sightless glazed eyes and yellow toothed grin, Maw McKenzie stared down at the dead man with puckered blue eyes. Without much hatred, though he had hated the living man. Rather with the feeling a man has when he has been packing a heavy burden for a long time and is just rid of it.

Those of Waldron's tough hands who were not dead or wounded had thrown away their guns and surrendered. Pat Drennan and Harve and Captain Lee Prouty were herding the prisoners.

Malcolm McKenzie rode over.

Maw McKenzie grinned faintly. "The last thing that feller done," he said, "was to stake me to this gun-shy horse."

And it was only after they had patched one another's bullet wounds and had made their prisoners bury their dead before they rode out of the country with orders never to come back, that Malcom McKenzie and his father had a chance to talk. And then they had not much to say.

Captain Lee Prouty had showed Maw the printed notice that had been pinned to the hanged Rube's chest: "Hanged by the Texas Rangers," it read.

"Not what you'd call strictly legal," said the Ranger captain. He lit a half-smoked cigarette and held the match flame to the paper.

It was twenty-five or thirty miles back to Buffalo, Oklahoma. They had the cook and horse wrangler and nighthawk, all Mexicans who had no part of the fighting. They had the chuck wagon and bed wagon and remuda, the money for the Round W trail herd. They were splitting it fifty-fifty between Maw McKenzie and the Quien Sabe's three owners. And in the mess wagon they found whiskey in the keg that had kept Waldron's bottle filled.

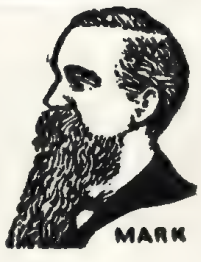
At Buffalo they laid over long enough to sell the wagons and remuda and let their wounds heal. Then Captain Lee Prouty and four Texas Rangers rode back home. Captain Prouty said he'd have to own up to a mighty poor memory for some things. He had plumb forgot to file that resignation from the Texas Rangers that Maw McKenzie had handed him.

THE END

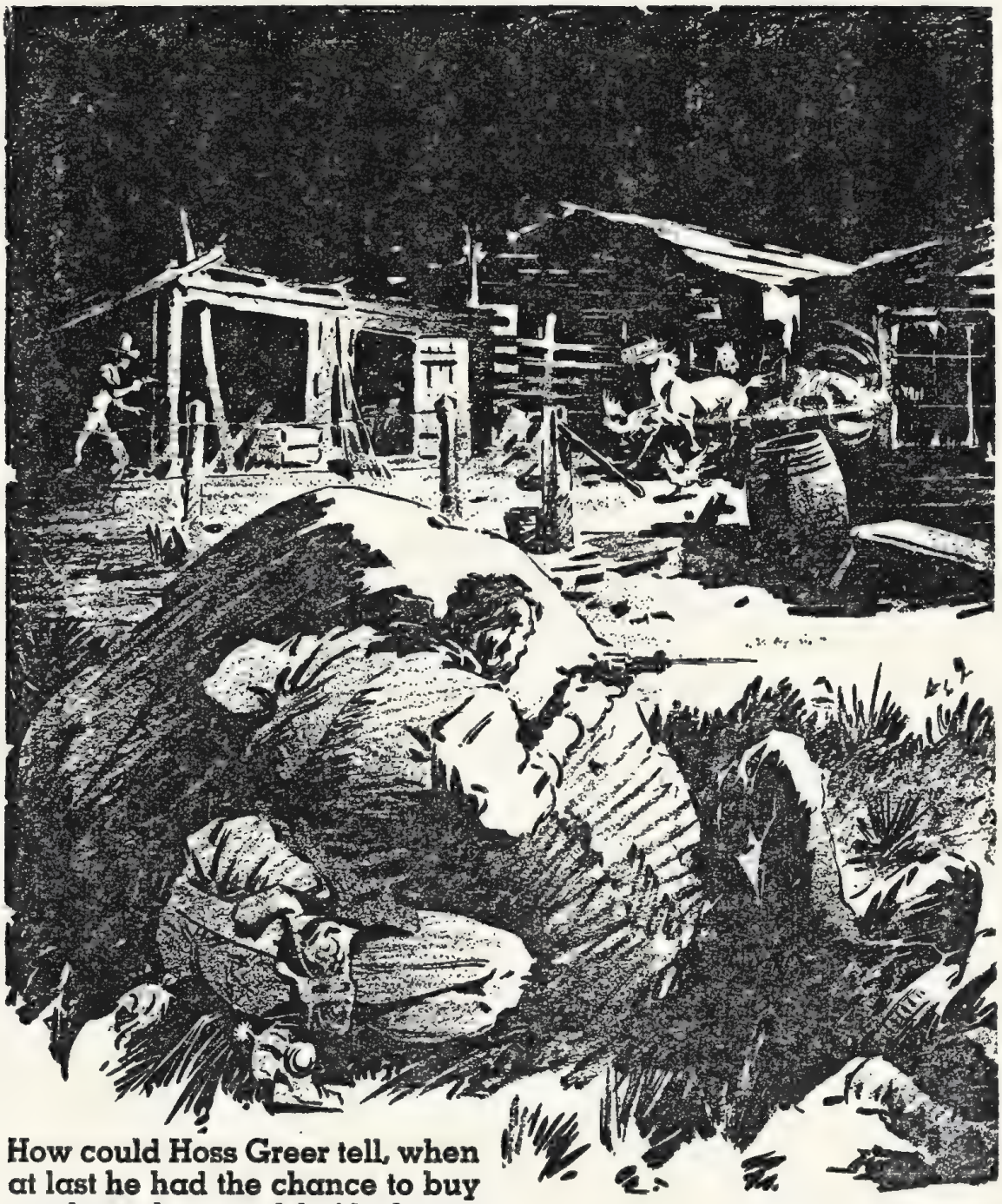
MAD

When a cough due to a cold drives you mad, look to Smith Brothers Cough Drops for s-o-o-t-h-i-n-g, pleasant relief. Two kinds... both delicious... Black or Menthol. Still cost only a nickel. Why pay more?

SMITH BROS. COUGH DROPS
BLACK OR MENTHOL—5¢



★ HOSS GREER'S DEAL



How could Hoss Greer tell, when at last he had the chance to buy up the rich spread he'd always wanted, that the innocent appearing final deed held the hidden promise of red ruin for the finest range that old cowman had ever seen, and—as a hidden joker—the contract, signed, sealed and delivered, for his own quick and violent death?

CHAPTER ONE

For Sale—One Cattle Empire

A GREAT deal has been told and written about the Tranquil Valley War—that sudden tide of hate and blood which swept the Mogul Mountain

WITH THE DEVIL ★ ★

Lafe Tuxbray launched his sudden attack within an hour of midnight. . . .

A New "Hoss Greer" Novel

By Harry F. Olmsted

country with gun and rope and torch. Some of that yarning is based upon fact; much more is conjectural or a result of trying to piece together remote and disconnected killings radiating from the hub of the trouble. But thus far, none correctly set forth the part Old Hoss Greer played in that sanguinary conflict, the cause of his joining the war, or the measure of his influence on the outcome.

As so often happened to Hoss, he was sucked into the murderous affair through

the guile of a bitter enemy, his own soft-heartedness in the face of an appeal, and his insatiable pride in ownership.

It started that hot, lazy summer day, when Hoss and his foreman, Gil Pastime, were playing seven-up on the vine-shaded porch of the ranch house at Tres Alamos. Hoss was nodding over his cards and about ready to call the game off, when Hung Soon came out with cold beer from the spring house.

"Man come," he announced. "Mebby Hung bling mo' beeah, yes?"

Hoss shook sleep from his eyes. Gil Pastime came up, staring. "Well, I'll be damned, boss!" he muttered. "Knowed I was droppin' off, but shore never figgered to dream Ol' Lafe Tuxbray was ridin' up like an old friend. Wait'll I pinch myself!"

Old Hoss bounced up, reaching for the gun that wasn't at his thigh. Written plainly on his deeply lined face were the bitter memories of the man whose name he had just heard spoken. His eyes were cold when Lafe Tuxbray got off his horse and came unbidden to the porch.

He was a slight, whiplike figure of a man, burdened now with a bearing of utter surrender and dejection. He paused as if halted by the chill atmosphere of silent antagonism, regarding the two men with extraordinary sharpness and sank into a chair as if wearied. "Mister Greer, you remember me?"

"Just in askin', Lafe," said Hoss, sourly, "you underestimate my memory. I've got all the reason in the world to remember you and your renegade outfit for what was done to me in the upper Grama Valley. An' you got even better reason to remember me."

"Ain't that the truth," said Lafe, with amazing humility. "I reckon you'd never listen to my reasons for startin' that swarray in the Grama, so I won't try. You gimme a lickin', Hoss, an' I ain't one to hold a grudge. I hope you ain't."

"When a man turns on me," clipped Hoss, "I'm done with him, permanent."

"I was afraid of that," Lafe sighed.

"That ain't what you was afraid of," charged Hoss, looking keenly at the little cowman from Tranquil Valley. "You didn't come here to bury no hatchets. It ain't in your nature. Come on out with it."

"You make it tough," said Tuxbray, "an' I suppose I'm wastin' my time even mentionin' it, but you should thank me for comin' here. I know you don't like me an' I figgered you'd be willin' to pay a little to get me plumb out of the cattle business. Yeah, in spite of auld lang syne, how about pickin' up my Long T—for a song?"

"Singin's out of my line," growled Hoss. But he was thinking of the worth of the Long T, the luck of the cowmen who controlled that matchless Tranquil Valley range. He was thinking too of the many disappointments he had experienced trying to buy first one and then another of the Tranquil Valley ranches, only to be laughed at.

Across from him, Gil Pastime half rose from his chair. "Don't cut off your nose to spite yore face, boss," he snapped.

"Shut up," said Hoss. "What's the matter with the Long T, Tuxbray? Bank about to take you over?"

"No. Not a dime against it, Hoss. Had a chattel on the cattle, but that's been satisfied an' the chitters sold. I'm out of the game, bein' unfitted for it, I reckon. I'm allus a victim of bad advice, like the time I hopped you. I'm sellin' out, an' givin' you the first grab at it. Sorta makin' up for the past, as the feller said."

"Leopard changin' spots, eh?" snorted Hoss. "How much?"

"Ten thousand, cash in hand. I'll leave the signed papers with the Hondo State Bank—deed to the quarter section home place, federal leases reachin' back to the crest of the Moguls. Corrals, buildin's an' fee land is worth all I'm askin'."

Hoss stood up, looking at this once arrogant, ruthless little man with a trace of

pity in his eyes. Always for Hoss there was tragedy in the sight of a cowman going belly up. He had seen it happen to many. Often he had wondered if it would happen to him.

"All right," he said, stifling his scruples at dealing with Tuxbray. "I'll be in Hondo sometime tomorrow. Say two o'clock. Meet me there."

Lafe rose. He was smiling now, and somehow reflecting his old scornful authority. "Not necessary," he said. "I've got to take the train at Globe at noon tomorrow. Be gone a week. But Ike Forbush, at the bank, will fix everything up. I'll hurry back now and take care of the papers. It'll make me hustle. Thanks, gentlemen." He shook their hands, quit the porch and rode off.

Hoss, watching him go, kept flipping his right hand as if to shake off something filthy and detestable. "Like shakin' hands with a dead fish," he growled. But Gil Pastime was enthusiastic.

"Shucks," he said. "I'd swaller a barrel of pride an' shake hands with a kettle of fish to pull off half the deal you just did. Think of it, boss! A goin' outfit in Tranquil, range for yore Mex cattle an' rid of a gent you hate—humpbacked an' teetotal!"

Hoss grinned. He couldn't understand his good fortune or its logic. Ten thousand dollars was too suspiciously cheap.

★

HOSS delegated four cowhands to drive his Mex herd, silenced Gil's pitiful pleas to be taken along and struck out for Hondo astride his top horse, Two-Bits. As promised, the Tuxbray deal was ready for him at the bank. There remained only to sign his check for ten thousand, pocket his title and ride for Tranquil valley, tickled with his bargain.

Hours later, Hoss crossed the low Sierra Andita and looked down into Tranquil Valley, pleasantly rolling, lush with black grama and striped with dashing creeks draining the towering Moguls. It was God's country. Hoss found the Long T deserted, all evidence pointing to the swift departure of its former occupants.

Buildings, sheds and corrals were old but serviceable. The barn loft was filled with wild hay. There were two wagons, a buckboard, a mowing machine. It sure was a steal.

Two days later, Hoss' cowboys came with the cattle, threw them onto fattening feed. Then for ten days, Hoss had them tinkering and mending, stocking grub, blankets and essentials. And searching for the "bug" in the place. Also, they traced the boundaries of the lease, across the Antelope Hills and into the Moguls.

Hoss had been away two weeks now and he felt the urge to get home. He appointed gangling, buck-toothed Squirrel Spence as temporary ramrod, and was saddling Two-Bits when the rider galloped in from the south. It was Judge Selim Haycock, Hoss' legal bulwark in Phoenix.

The judge was fifty-five and known wherever Territorial court convened. A stalwart jury pleader, he was employed where stakes were high and legal insurance required at any price. He and Hoss had come up together in Arizona, taking the bad with the good and always fighting. Soft and heavy, Haycock swung lamely from the saddle, then looked at Hoss with heavy solemnity.

"A nice thing," he complained. "I hit Tres Alamos for a nice rest and find you gallivanting in Tranquil. Don't you ever stay home, you nomad?"

"No mad at you, Judge." Hoss grinned, shook hands. "Why didn't you wait for me? I'm headed home right now; you can ride with me."

"Not another jounce, by godfrey," grimaced the judge. "I'm galled; my bottle's empty and I feel like a pilgrim in Gehenna. Got anything for that, Hoss?"

Hoss had. Turning the animals into the corral, he led his guest to the house and a bottle, fully sympathetic to this great man's one weakness. Haycock drank, wiped the neck of the bottle and handed it back.

Ruefully, Hoss regarded the moisture in the bottom, drained it and scowled. "That slug, Selim," he said, "should jar you into speech. You hate the saddle too bad to ride up here for a rest. What's up?"

The judge studied the landscape, stroking his chin. "This buy," he said, dubiously. "You should never act, Hoss, till you consult me. Got any papers?"

He studied the transfers, handed them back. "Deed looks all right, but the leases are worthless. Sometime you'll remember that you pay me for legal service."

"What's wrong?" asked Hoss, meekly.

"Plenty. I rode up here to protect you on your own leases. Those leases, executed by the Land Commissioner, were voided the first of last month. They can be renewed within six months, but only by application to the new administrators—the Forest Service. I brought the renewal papers up for you to sign. But this thing," he swung his hand ". . . the law specifically states that the renewal must be made by the original lessee, except in the event of the lessee's death."

"Lafe Tuxbray better prepare to die," said Hoss, harshly, "if he's tricked me. But, hell, I've still got the deed to his home place."

"A quarter section, surrounded by another man's leases, is no good to you, Hoss."

Hoss slept with the galling thought that night and ate breakfast with it next morning. The meal was barely finished when the hail came from outside: "Anybody home?"

The six men at the table bounced up and went outside to find four horsemen sitting their fiddle-footing mounts. One was Lafe Tuxbray, showing none of his previous humility. Another, equally arrogant and unfriendly, was Paint Cargile—a gun-notcher elevated to the position of high sheriff through political pull and the untimely demise of Bill Harrison, square shooter and many years Mesquite County's sheriff. With these two were two poker-faced men, each wearing two guns, each scowling at the Greer outfit.

Paint Cargile ran his eyes over the group. "Which one of you gents is Hostetter Greer?" he demanded.

If Hoss had not been r'iled at sight of these two men who had tried to run him out of Grama Valley, the sound of that hated name would have made him fit to tie. His face reddened. "You know doddurned well which one, Paint, seein' yo're still carryin' Greer lead in your lousy carcass. What you want?"

Cargile laughed tightly, swung down and walked to the wall of the house. Here he tacked up a notice, using the butt of his pistol. "Notice of ejectment, Hostetter, issued by Judge John Burbank in Globe. You got thirty days to clear out, an' I hope you won't kick up your usual rumpus. Here's your service."

He extended the paper, which Hoss struck to the ground. A roar broke the enraged cowman's lips and his hand slapped back against his holster. "Why you dirty cow-hocked, hog-jowled sheep louse!" Hoss railled. "This is Lafe Tuxbray's work an' he's drug in yore crooked law to back his sleeved aces. Mebby you'd like to start puttin' me off now?"

Judge Selim Haycock said: "Take it easy, Hoss," and stooped for the fallen paper. Swiftly his trained eyes ran down it. Not until he had finished did he speak. "You've tacked your notice in the wrong place, Sheriff. This particular quarter section, I understand, was recently deeded to Mister Greer by Lafe Tuxbray, through the bank. The . . ."

"That's a lie!" rapped Tuxbray. "I deeded the man nothing."

"You lie through yore spittin' teeth!" howled Hoss, quite beside himself. "I've got the deed right here, signed by you, an' . . ."

"I don't care what you've got, who signed it or nothin' else," Tuxbray roared. "I never signed it an' if you try to put a cloud onto my title, I'll sue you for all you got. You can't bluff me, you long-eared, brayin' jackass. You're on my land an' I'm puttin' you off, all legal."

The sheer boldness of it shocked Hoss, halted his fiery anger and returned him to his real fighting pose—a chill suggestion of inhumanity and a calm, almost courteous voice. "My judgment told me," he said, "that when you came to my place with the offer to sell, you just couldn't be on the level, Tuxbray. It was too——"

"Haven't been near your place," cut in Tuxbray. "An' I never offered the Long T for sale. But go on."

"I've got two witnesses that will testify that you done both," hummed Hoss. "And the Hondo banker will swear that you left the deed and papers at the bank, and that you've received my money. I couldn't lose if I wanted to take you to court—which I won't. Judge Colt can decide this case, very nice an' clubby."

"The ejectment," put in the judge, "is based on the leases—not the deeded land. I suppose, Mister Tuxbray . . ." his wise eyes played upon the stiffly ready Long T boss, "that means you've contracted to take out new leases with the Forestry Service."

"Just what I done," snapped Lafe Tuxbray. "What of it?"

"This of it, my friend. Possession is still nine points of the law, you understand. And I might add that, with what little law I know, I'll make it plenty hot for the perpetrator of this steal before ever you get us off."

The sheriff reined his horse around, his eyes sulky. "I've heard enough jawin' an' I've got work to do. You got yore walkin' papers, Greer, an' it won't be healthy to overlook same. If it's gun-play you crave, you can get it quicker'n scat in this county. Come on, boys!"

They galloped away, leaving six hotly stirred men behind. The humor of it hit Old Hoss then and a sudden grin splashed across his weathered face. "By hell," he cackled, "if I didn't stick my head right into it! An' damned if I don't believe you'd have bit just as quick as me, Judge. Well . . . ?"

"No laughing matter, Hoss." Selim Haycock's heavy shoulders moved with the ferment of challenge and an insistant restlessness. "If you can't hold this layout, he's got your money, sure as shooting. The signatures will turn out to be forged and Judge John Burbank—a weak and corrupt member of my own honorable profession—will find against you. There's no time to lose. Saddle my horse. I'm riding to Hondo for a flask and then going to Globe to pull a few legal strings that may help us."

Hoss had arguments, but they were futile. The judge had just arrived and no good would be served either to him or to Hoss by chasing the will-o-the-wisp of outraged law. The judge was in no physical shape to make the long, hard return ride. Anyhow, the case would have been tried, judgment rendered and settlement made before he could get back.

But Hoss never had seen a day when he could out-talk Selim Haycock. He didn't now. Just before the lawyer took out for Hondo town, he leaned over to speak into Hoss' ear. His eyes were sparkling.

"In some ways, old friend," he said fervently, "I'd rather stay here and watch you handle this case in your own way. Yes, and help you present the case before the bar of Old Judge Colt. But take a tip from a lawyer who never scorned a colleague's advice. Send to Tres Alamos for Gil Pastime, and a crew of fighting boys. I think you'll need them."

Hoss' eyes changed and he shook his head slowly. "Don't reckon I could make you understand, Selim," he murmured. "But if the time comes I need them boys, I wouldn't want 'em near me to get hurt. 'Cause when that time comes, it will mean they've took the jump on me, which is just another way of sayin' they've got me licked. No, I'll plead my case sudden, swift an' all out. If that don't win for me, I'm done."

"Spoken like a man," grinned the judge. "But don't move too fast, Hoss. If I'm lucky, I'll be back directly with a legal order that will save you the trouble of gunplay."

"Trouble?" Hoss grinned fiercely after the galloping figure of the man who had made of his victories possible. "Trouble, hell! It'll be a pleasure, Judge!"

CHAPTER TWO

Blood-Red Battle-Lines

THREE hours after Selim Haycock's departure, Hoss was trying vainly to argue his men into returning to Tres Alamos until he sent for them. But they laughed at his clumsy attempts to get them out of harm's way.

"You made me foreman of this cock-eyed spread," said Squirrel Spence, with a broad, buck-toothed grin. "An' I'm stickin' till hell freezes a mile deep!

"Fire me? Go ahead, only then I'm free to do as I please. An' that'll be to stay on for the rooster fight. Trespassin'? Mebby-so, Hoss, but you'll likely be too busy to put me off when they make a play at yuh. And accordin' to Tuxbray, this ain't yore land to put me off of. An' mebby you ain't man enough to boot me off, anyway!"

The other three talked just as hard, albeit with ear-to-ear grins. And Hoss admitted they were a pack of damned fools, but with a suspicion of moisture in his sagacious old eyes, when the rider came flogging his horse to the door.

He was lean and gray, about Hoss' age, and terribly excited. Said his name was Justin Grimm, owner of the Rolling G, a spread down valley some five miles. He was waving a paper like the one so lately served on Hoss, cussing a blue streak.

"That misbred son of a coyote-buzzard! That backstabbin', yella-striped hunk of reptile meat. That man, Tuxbray, was my best friend, Greer. I've gone outen my way to he'p him out, time an' again. An'

he's bin a good neighbor. But now look! He—"

"Sold you his holdin's here, for which you paid at the bank when he was absent?" finished Hoss. "What bank?"

"Winslow," wailed Grimm. "Now he denies it, says I was victimized an' got no leg to stand on. I throwed about a hundred head of feeders onto the lease ground an' now he slams a writ of ejectment onto me. . . ."

This was news, and Hoss took the paper from his hands, squinting as he ran the substance of it. He was more than passably interested now because if it happened to two, it could have happened to every ambitious cowman in the valley. Which meant a long and expensive settlement, even though a peaceful one, among those Tuxbray had victimized. But what he read took his mind off that eventuality.

"Grimm," he said. "This order of ejection don't concern the Long T leases ay-tall. They're crowdin' you off your own property, which seems to fall under the forest jurisdiction. You got a deed to yore home place?"

"No deed, no." Grimm bit his lip. "Never went to the trouble to fill out the papers. I put my trust in squatter's rights."

"An' now they've got you," said Old Hoss. "Natural, the Commissioner of Lands, in Washington, ain't got record of yore squatter rights. So yore home place lumps in with the rest, an' Tuxbray's got a Forest lease on it."

"What good'll that do him? I've got option on the range leases, stretchin' back from it."

"There's a fine point at law," mused Hoss. "The range leases go with the controllin' ranch property. Tuxbray will own that. He's played a pretty smooth game up to now. An' he'll win unless we make up lost ground an' play the same game. You set to fight, or let yore outfit go?"

"I told Tuxbray I'd lead him up plenty if I caught him on my land again," growled Grimm. "Couple uh more cowmen here will join me—Squint Foster an' Huffy O'Connell. I'll ride over an' get them, pick up my boys an' return here fer a council uh war. See you later." He plied his gooseneck spurs and flashed away. And a vast impatience welled up in Hoss as he prepared to put in the time waiting. He knew the Tuxbrays of this world struck swift and hard and fiercely at their foes.

Along about noon, Grimm came riding in with six punchers. The outfit was loaded to the teeth with rifles, pistols, and even one buckshot scattergun in the hands of Floursack Sims, his cook. The spirit to do battle had faded from Grimm's face and in its place was a strange admixture of rage, fear and regret.

"Seen Foster an' O'Connell," he said, spitting. "But Tuxbray seen 'em first an' throwed the fear of God into 'em. They're both pullin' out till after Natur's done took her course. Then, says they, they'll come back."

"To what?" sneered Hoss. "That gives us only twelve fightin' men. If Tuxbray don't hit us with more'n twenty, we'll be sittin' . . ."

"Twenty!" Grimm scoffed. "I was comin' to that. O'Connell an' Foster, who didn't buy the Long T because they was short of cash, has been over to the big new place Tuxbray's buildin' at the south end of the Antelopes. They both agree he's got the fanciest passel of gun-slingers ever gathered under one ramrod. Forty or fifty of 'em, an' all strangers in the Tranquil country. That finished them two boys."

"Hear that?" Hoss faced his men. "Odds is four to one. They's time yet to haul out an' save yore skins, an' no hard feelin's here."

"Ain't every man could rub our fur thataway," growled Squirrel Spence, and his feelings were echoed by the rest. "Main things now is to get somethin' to

fight with. All the ca'tridges I got is in my loops, an' some empty."

Hoss grunted, whipped out some folding money. "Slope on down to Amity, at the south end of the valley, an' buy all the .30-30 ca'tridges an' .45 shells they got."

A half hour after Squirrel's departure, Hoss and Justin Grimm were roused from their discussion of strategy by a sudden excitement among the men. A chuckwagon came jouncing across the flat, outridden by four horsemen. The outfit came wheeling into the yard and a tall, splendidly built rider swung over to Justin Grimm. His eyes showed embarrassment.

"Howdy, Mister Grimm," he said. "O'Connell paid us off an' pulled out. So I throwed what grub the' was in the wagon, together with some extra guns an' ca'tridges, an' drove over. Me an' the boys like this valley. It's done good by us. We'd admire to fight ag'in' them bleaters. . . ."

"Bleaters?" Old Hoss started. "Meanin' what?"

"Thousands comin' over the hill, right now," said the tall youngster, whom Grimm introduced as Val Kingdom, ramrod of O'Connell's Leaning O. "Tuxbray's bringin' in fifty thousand, I'm told. In six months this valley won't be fit for a decent man or cow to track his hocks in."

"Seventeen," grinned Hoss, whose hate of the woolies was traditional. "Odds has sagged to three to one, gents. Now what about headquarters? This place ain't stocked none too good an' she's blind on two sides. We can't hold both places, an' Tuxbray'll be less apt to burn his own ranch than yours, Grimm. What you think?"

"I was doin' some ponderin' on that," said Grimm. "Natural, I'd admire to save my house if possible, but the important thing is cover, when an' if we need it. I built it sill-high with cee-ment an' rock, an' logs above that. An' inside the walls I've got what I call my patio, like the Mexes use. Safe place to keep our broncs if lead gets to flyin' around. I've got a inside cistern full of good water an', with what grub you got here, we could stand a month's siege."

So it was decided to use the Rolling G as headquarters. Grimm led the way there, with only Hoss remaining behind to await Squirrel Spence's coming. He didn't have long to wait.

Squirrel came slanting in from the south, like devils were on his tail.

★

HIS face was a swollen, bloody mask, but still he could grin when Hoss exclaimed: "Whatever from hell happened to you? You look like somethin' kicked outa the drag end of a stampede."

"When they wouldn't sell me shells," said the buck-toothed youngster, "I got some tough. They got tougher."

"Who got tougher?"

"Tuxbray's men. They've bought out the general store, or so they claim. Everything in it's Tuxbray's."

"Like hell an' fell in it!" snapped Hoss. "Looks to me like somebody put the boots to yore face. Come on, we'll go down there together, an' . . ."

"They'll be layin' for us."

"Let 'em," gritted the old cowman. "I been laid for all my life."

Stirrup to stirrup, they rode toward Amity, swinging wide to come in from the west, instead of the north. Before they crossed the creek, Hoss laid out a simple plan, then rode alone into the settlement.

The place was as peaceful as its name, as quiet as it was small. Before the Amity Mercantile Company, Hoss lit down, threw the rein over a hitchbar and strode into the store.

A hulking, thick shouldered man stood behind a counter, his knuckles braced, his eyes hard and intent upon Hoss. "What

you want, neighbor?" he rumbled, as Hoss regarded the three gun-hung customers lolling against a pile of grain sacks. None would ever have picked them as working ranch hands.

"Gimme a box of .45 ca'tridges," said Hoss.

"No dice," said the burly clerk. "Stock belongs to Tuxbray. He's partic'lar who he sells to."

"His privilege," Hoss' cold eyes glinted. "But not to manhandle my men when I send 'em in to trade."

The clerk straightened before Hoss' approach. One of the loungers slid off the sacks and slapped leather.

"Him an' me are square," said Spence. "I plugged him in the belly."

"An' the odds are shrinkin' to two to one an' even, boy. There, now you take them two .30-30's in the rack, Squirrel, an' ride on over to Grimm's. An' you, Yellabelly, tie the necks of them two sacks together an' tote 'em out to my saddle. Tie 'em on."

"No!" begged the gunman. "They're waitin' an' they'll kill me sure. You can't do that to me."

"Which is all I want to know," rapped Hoss. "Out back with you. Come on—git movin'."

He prodded the man out the rear door

Harry F. Olmsted, author of this novel, and creator of the famous Old Hoss Greer, is —along with other such famous Western authors as Walt Coburn, Robert E. Mahaffay and Tom Roan—also a regular contributor to DIME WESTERN. For 100% Western fiction treat, buy your copy today!

With a motion smooth and swift as a flicker's wing flap, Hoss drew and thumbed a shot into the gunman's shoulder, dropping him to the floor.

The other two scrambled off their perches, seeking safety and drawing the same time—a practice never conducive of great success. Hoss, pivoting, laid his pistol barrel across the skull of the clerk, who stooped for a scattergun. He sank like a pole-axed beef.

A shot from the rear announced that Squirrel was in action. The beating they had served him interfered none at all with his aim. Another gunman cried out, dropped his gun and tried to hold erect. But weakness floored him. The fourth one held up his arms and begged, white-faced, for his life.

"Dump out two sacks of that grain," said Hoss. "An' load in all that ammunition on the shelves." He strode behind the counter, holstered his weapon after reloading and came up with the scattergun. "This may come in handy," he chortled. "Which one kicked you in the face?"

to the wagon-loading platform. There, with two fingers to his lips, he sent a shrill blast skyward. An instant later, Two-Bits came swerving around the corner, stepping high, wide and handsome to avoid treading on the trailing split reins. Hoss instructed the tying on of the heavy ammunition sacks, then booted the gunman off the platform and hit the saddle.

As he cleared the corner of the Mercantile, a yell rocketed from the street and three men came dashing between buildings, fogging wild lead as they ran. Hoss screwed in the saddle and, with cagey Two-Bits changing to his single-footing pace conducive to good shooting from his back, Hoss dropped those three gents with one barrel-nine buckshot.

The range was long, but it opened the way out of town. From across the creek came Squirrel's high yell rocketing. Hoss kneed Two-Bits into the wash, and with bullets screaming over his head, he joined Squirrel and poured the steel. Already a gun-crew was a-horse behind them, giving chase.

CHAPTER FOUR

White Injuns!

IT WAS Hoss Greer's boast that, given a half mile start, Two-Bits could not be overtaken by any horse at any distance. And, hearing the drone of rifle bullets from behind, the sagacious animal tried to flash his blinding speed now. Hoss held him in, much to the horse's disgust, in order not to leave Squirrel behind. Thus, just out of rifle range, the two horses thundered over the rising foreground and into sight of the Rolling G. Old Hoss, in the lead, slackened pace.

"By cripes, Squirrel. Tuxbray's cut loose his wolf, bold as dammit an' in broad daylight." His keen gray eyes weighed the action down yonder on the flats, and he said with more regret than anger: "The fools! The ringtailed dang fools went back for them Mex cattle of mine. An' Tuxbray's cut 'em off. The hull herd ain't worth one drop of human blood."

Squirrel's voice reflected none of the emotion he must have been feeling as it became plain to him that they were cut off from the ranch, caught between two fires. "Now look at them boys ride an' shoot."

Tufts of gunsmoke came from spots where the renegades had coyoted in close and were feeding lead through the windows from behind safe coverts. About a mile north of the house, the feeder herd was stampeding toward the hills, the faint thunder of their run reaching clear across the valley.

Scuddling past the roaring cattle, riding slanting, were Skeeter Christy, Long Drink Logan and Silent Somes from Tres Alamos. Also was Justin Grimm's cook, Floursack Sims, his long gray hair flying, his floursack apron fluttering like a flag behind the saddle. Those four were throwing back lead and trying to keep part of the herd between themselves and almost a score of vengeful gunning riders.

Hoss cussed. "No good stayin' here, Squirrel," he said, with a glance over his shoulder. "It's sink or swim, right here. Oh, hell, foller me, an' le's go out a-shootin'!"

Lead was slashing around them as they sped toward the Rolling G. And the yells of their pursuers, reaching down into the valley, drew the attention of the vandals attacking the ranch. They swung about to look, then rose and scuttled for the draw where their horses were tethered. Gunfire from the ranch house in the trees bowled over two, the rest disappearing as they leaped into a cut barranca. Like avenging tornadoes, Hoss and Squirrel came soaring over the bank, loosing their own hell, and some inferno it was.

A half dozen or more horsemen were already pelting along the bottom. Three of these Hoss and Squirrel caught between them. Squirrel dropped one, took a bullet and plumped to the ground. Hoss almost cut one in two with the loaded barrel of his scatter-gun, and decided against making a try at the other one.

There was heaviness in Hoss' breast as he turned back for Squirrel. But the kid was tough, and he was getting up on shaky legs as Hoss reached him and pulled him up. Hanging low, against the lead thrown by those who had chased them from Amity, they gained the house without being hit. Justin Grimm himself opened the gate for them and let them into the patio, already crowded with a near dozen ponies.

"Thank God you made it, Greer!" he said, holding out his arms to help the white-lipped Squirrel. "They caught us plumb off guard, which it's all my fault. Never looked for 'em to be so bold as to show their faces in daylight. It's cost us dear, seein' we're short-handed to begin with. Coaly Gregg is dead, an' likewise O'Connell's Lorn Redman. My ramrod's got a bullet into him an' he'll do no more fightin' in this war. . . ."

"Like hell I won't!" a voice poured through an open door. "I'll take pay for Coaly, an' don't you think different!"

"Which speerit," said Hoss, a tremor in his tone, "should orta inspire a dead man to fight. An' here's food for our fightin' tools, boys, took right from where it'll hurt Lafe Tuxbray worst. Carry Squirrel inside, boys, an' I'll see how bad he's hurt." He tossed the cartridges aside and followed them into the room where Cayenne Rumler lay writhing in pain, his lips white, his teeth grinding. He alternated gritted curses and took long pulls from a whiskey bottle.

Squirrel was conscious but hazy, and Hoss worked fast to take advantage of deadened senses. A bullet had smashed his collar bone and lodged under the edge of the shoulder blade. Hoss dug it out, cleaned the wound with whiskey, forced a shot down Squirrel's throat and bound him up with strips torn from a blanket.

Having finished, Ross washed up and went into the patio for a smoke. No gunfire sounded anywhere. The herd had vanished in the hills and the fate of the Tres Alamos boys was shrouded in silence.

Grimm came to Hoss, worried. "Looks like they're gatherin' to hit us after dark, Greer. If they come from four sides, it'll be nip an' tuck."

"Grimm," said Hoss, darkly. "Why'd you let them boys of mine go after them worthless cattle? Hell, they didn't have no more chance than a fish ag'in' a guttin' knife."

"Tried to auger 'em out of it," said Grimm. "Might better have saved my breath. They 'lowed they'd be double damned if they drive cows here an' let a gent like Tuxbray have 'em. An' that glandered-up cook of mine, Floursack, he sided 'em. It's too bad; we couldn't afford to lose 'em. What we gonna do, with only eleven men left an' two of them crippled? Yeah, an' another only a stove-up grub-spoiler!"

He had posed a question that stumped Hoss, who didn't try to answer. He picked up the commandeered ammunition, took it inside and laid it out handy for use. He weighed the men, where they sat each at his guard post, prying out the strengths and weakness of each, his hidden qualities. A sullenness, a spirit of heavy hostility held them all in its grip. Hell, thought Hoss, to feel thataway and have to sit idly and let hate gnaw at yore innards.

The afternoon wore away, and at sundown, Biscuits Aker, the O'Connell cook, served a hot meal, badly needed but hardly enjoyed. Men ate as if the food was something to be gotten over with soon as possible. Night fell, moonless and with a slithery little wind whipping the grama heads.

That gale fetched whispers to Hoss' ears, whispers lost upon the others who thought of nearer and more personal menaces. Hoss broke open a box of buckshot shells, rammed a handful into his pocket, loaded the scattergun and went out to jam it into the scabbard under his saddle fender.

Grimm followed him out. "What's cookin' in that head of yours, Greer?"

"Hang an' rattle," said Hoss, "an' shoot hell out of 'em if they jump you, which I doubt they will. I'm sashayin' out for a look around. Shut the gate after me."

"A fool idea," growled Grimm, knowing argument to be useless. "They're likely waitin' for us to try just such a trick." He lifted the bar, swung the heavy gate open. Hoss pulled up the cinch, threw a leg over the saddle and rode out.

"Hope they are waitin', Justin," he said, and then the night swallowed him.

★

HOSS rode north of due west, straight into the teeth of the wind. The way tipped up into the hills and the first ridge he topped, he heard the

thing that never fooled a man of his experience—the spaced fluttering of distant gunfire.

Upwind he ran the sound for a full half hour, up one slope and down the next, angling across finger-like foothill ridges. The black mountain wall loomed ahead and Hoss thought he could see the pencillings of muzzle flame, but maybe it was a trick of his straining eyes.

The gun-blasting suddenly ceased and Hoss drew rein, his heart heavy. To him, that silence meant wipe-out. But which way?

A minute passed. Two. Then he heard the swift clatter of hoofs pounding down the canyon which lay below him. That meant some of his own boys making a run for it, or Tuxbray men scudding away from their foul work. In either case, Hoss had business with them. He reined Two-Bits into the draw, planted him across the trail and jerked the scattergun free. His voice rifled toward the pelting shadows, materializing in the starlight. Hoss' eyes narrowed.

"Haul down, hawssbackers! Sing out yore brand or I'll saw you in two with buckshot."

"Hoss Greer! When was I ever so glad to hear the boss holler!" It was the dinning voice of Silent Somes, one of the boys Hoss had brought from Tres Alamos. With him was Skeeter Christy. Behind them, twisted in the saddle and lining a carbine along the backtrail was the great, gray slab of a man who found cooking too tame—Floursack Sims.

"Where's Long Drink Logan?" asked Hoss, naming the unaccounted for member of his crew.

"Back yonder where we stood 'em off," confessed Silent. "He got it in the stummick, which is why we had to take cover in the rocks. He got purty bad, so come dark we decided to make a break an' ride fer help, at the same time drawin' 'em away from Long Drink. But they ain't drawin'. Hear anything, Floursack?"

"Nary a hoofbeat," growled the Long T cook. "You know I told yuh I figgered most of 'em hauled out after dark, leavin' only a few to hold us here an' whittle us down slow. By hell, I'm fer goin' back now an' rubbin' them polecats out!"

"Easy," cautioned Hoss. "We'll go back afoot, take Long Drink outa them rocks without rousin' a ruckus. Then, with Skeeter takin' him down to the ranch, three of us will call on them buzzards. Come on."

They rode a ways and then tied the ponies off trail. It wasn't far to walk, not over a quarter mile, but all uphill and rocky going. They climbed carefully, with never a sign from above that their approach had been discovered by the group that tended a fire in a nest of high rocks.

Hoss knelt beside the still form, where his men had made their stand, pressed his palm against the cheek. It was cool, not feverish. "He orta make it all right," he told them, then suddenly caught his breath. "Wait a minute!"

He thumbed a match and flipped it out at once. That brief beam had showed them something that filled them with hate, something that brought quick, bitter curses to their lips. Long Drink Logan was dead, his throat cut from ear to ear, his scalp lock gone.

Hoss' dried, saddle-leather face screwed into a mask of hate. "Leapin' fires of Tophet!" he rumbled. "Them white Injuns gutted him like a dog, whilest he was helpless. Boys, for that I'm claimin' a pair of Long T ears for ever' finger an' toe Long Drink's got."

"What we waitin' fer?" snapped Floursack Sims. "Listen!" Through the night, from the direction of that fireglow in the nest of rocks, came a laugh. It was like a slap in the face.

"Did yuh hear them rabbits get out?" The laugher's voice lifted. "Killin' hawses escapin', an' fearin' we'd bust our necks

ridin' after 'em? They won't stop till they get clear of the Tranquil, which is what Lafe wants. By quittin' their salivated gun pardner, they freed fifteen of the boys for the bloody wipeout. All I regret is that us four has gotta stay up here an' ride the ridge, thus missin' the fun."

"Come on," said Hoss. "They won't regret it long." His hoarse whisper crackled in terse orders. They crept forward, spreading out to encircle the fire. Hoss, pausing against the outside face of a boulder hiding the renegades, counted fifty, to allow his three mates to get set. He rose, loosened his gun in its leather. Somewhere a loose stone rolled.

"What's that?" The rumble of renegade talk ceased as they listened. Hoss caught at a rocky projection, hurled himself upward, planting himself atop the boulder. Below him four renegades were scrambling up, slapping leather. They paused, their faces going pallid as fish bellies as the rest of the surrounding quartet leaped into sight with bare guns.

Hoss, his rage running up the scale, eyed them sourly. "Three coyotes an' a half-breed Injun," he said. "Make up yore minds, you poison lice. Better foller yore first hunch an' draw. 'Cause if you cave, you'll all be treadin' air an' in just whatever time it takes to string you."

The hinges of hell creaked open for those four at the fire. It was really no choice at all, Hoss' offer. So four guns came streaking out and four men made their bids for escape with spitting weapons. Curses filled the night, and gun echoes. The four men above them rolled out their answers to treachery, savagery and greed. The halfbreed dropped his gun, stumbled to a rock for support and sank down, blood gushing from his mouth. One of the others reeled like a dervish, cried out faintly and fell across the fire. The other two went down in their tracks, soundlessly, without struggle.

Old Hoss' boots rasped in the succeeding painful silence. It was like him to pull the dying renegade out of the fire. It was like him too that he ordered the rest to string the four bodies from a nearby pine limb, as a warning to others of their kind. And, more than anything, it was like him to take the grisly scalp trophy back to where Long Drink Logan lay, place it on his head before they scooped out his shallow grave. . . .

CHAPTER FIVE

Six-Shooter Medicine

ANOTHER day lifted its curtains in the east. And out of the dawn haze came Hoss and Floursack, Skeeter Christy and Silent Somes, to the Rolling G. They were keenly alive to any possible blockade, and hungry to break it. And they were hailed with glee by the

handful of hide-whole survivors, who had never hoped to see them again.

One corner of the ranch house roof had been burned away. Two more of the O'Connell men were dead and another Grimm man wounded. Of the original seventeen, five were dead; three were down with wounds and the rest were red eyed from sleeplessness.

Lafe Tuxbray had launched a savage assault within an hour of midnight, and had almost won. He had drawn off his warriors shortly before Hoss' arrival. Huddled bodies lay out there between the house and the barranca. Two wounded men had been brought inside to be cared for—something that met with Hoss' full approval when he saw the fellow's eyes snap shut as Hoss' glance fell upon him.

It started the old cowman's imagination to working. He took worried Justin Grimm aside.

"One uh them wounded buzzards ain't feelin' as bad as he lets on," he said. "If you was to make half a chance for him, he'd make a run for it. Which that might not be a bad idea."

"He ain't hurt bad," admitted the Rolling G boss. "Just a clean hole through his back muscles. When I think of my Coaly Gregg, I want to kill these two an' all the rest of 'em, windin' up with Tuxbray."

"Good idea," said Hoss grimly. "But to do it, you've gotta use yore head." He studied, stroking his jaw. "Ain't but a handful of us now, an' every time they hit us they'll be less. Now if we could just lay a plant that the wounded jigger could overhear an' carry to his boss, we might decoy them devils into an ambush an' make this scrap more even—"

"Hey!" Val Kingdon, the tall O'Connell ramrod, called from his window vantage. "Feller showin' at the edge of brush, yonder, wavin' a white flag. Looks like a Mex."

"Hold yore fire, everybody!" Old Hoss hurried to look. It was a Mexican, and a badly scared one. Hoss yelled at him: "What you want, hombre. Make it short an' make it good. If it's a trick you'll eat lead. Start talkin'."

Rifles cocked in the ranch house and every guard redoubled his alertness to attack. The messenger's voice shook a little as he answered. "Señores, I am come from the Long T. Señor Tuxbray she say to tell you the *juez*—Señor Haycock—she prisoner now. Eef you not surrender by tomorrow night, Señor Haycock she be keel. What I tell heem?"

Hoss had to have time. He hollered: "Come back tomorrow mornin' an' you'll get an answer."

The messenger vanished. Justin Grimm sank his fingers into Hoss' arm. "You was sayin' somethin' interestin', Greer, when interrupted."

Hoss looked at the two wounded Long T men, said sourly: "Get them two out into the patio an' I'll give you my idea." And then he whispered: "Leave the door ajar, jest a little."

Grimm's face showed puzzlement as he carried out the order. And when it was done, every eye came to Hoss. His voice lifted just a little.

"We're practically out of shells an' food," he said, his wink warning against argument. "An' we're as good as licked. If we go down, it ain't my idea to be snuffed out like rats in a rain bar'l. Go down fightin'—that's my motto. Carry the fight to the enemy. They won't be expectin' us. Tonight we'll ride to Tuxbray's new place, bust right into 'em an' kill till we're killed. What you think?"

"Now yo're shoutin'," yelled Floursack Sims.

They talked it up strongly. Once, when faint sounds filtered in from the patio, one of the boys would have investigated. But Hoss signed him to stand his hand.

A half hour later, when Hoss flung the door open, one of the wounded men was

gone. As was Hoss' Two-Bits horse.

Hoss grinned. What better use could Two-Bits be put to than to carry that word to Tuxbray?

"That talk of mine," he explained, "proves you can make anything sound good. The Long T is on a full war footin', usin' professional gun-fighters. With us a suicide attempt like I pictured is just what they'd expect an' prepare for.

"Now here's my real idea: While you boys ride close like you was about to attack, I'll slip in from the hill, make a try to find the judge an' get him out. Keep 'em interested for fifteen-twenty minutes, then hightail back here. I'll take my chances after that."

"Smart idea," said Val Kingdon admiringly. "But why hunt cover like coyotes when we make the run for home. A few of us can stage the fake attack, then pull Tuxbray's fighters into a gun-trap where the rest of our outfit is layin'. We'll deal 'em grief, I can promise."

They planned it in detail, Hoss deferring to Kingdon and Justin Grimm, both of whom knew the ground at Tuxbray's new layout. It generated the first enthusiasm in the weary fighters. Even Squirrel Spence and Cayenne Rumler, Grimm's ramrod, demonstrated several muscular contortions to prove their fitness.

Taking turns at lookout, the men spent most of the day sleeping. At sundown, Biscuits Aker set out a big meal which hungry men demolished. The last of the afterglow had not faded when they sallied forth with full belt loops.

Hoss and Justin Grimm rode in the lead. After them came Skeeter Christy and Silent Somes, of Hoss' outfit; Floursack Sims, Turkey Sanders and Tumbleweed Thoms, of the Rolling G; and Val Kingdon of the O'Connell spread. Eight fighters—a thin line to decoy and spring a trap. Behind them, at the ranch, Cayenne Rumler was in charge, Malo Barton and Squirrel Spence to side him. Each were reconciled in the hope that Tuxbray might strike at them before their mates returned.

A MILE from the new Tuxbray place they halted. It was a black night, whipped by a gusty wind that sent dark clouds scudding up out of the east. Hoss snapped a few low-voiced reminders, waited for their acknowledgement, and then sent his pony in a wide circle that would bring him to the foothill toe, a half mile from the Tuxbray outfit. Of the seven he left behind, five dropped into the wide wash that headed above the outlaw hangout, and two moved slowly toward the ranch to contact the enemy.

Hoss reached the hill without incident, dismounted and tied his pony. Looking to his gun loads, he rimmed the hill, slowly climbing, and presently saw the bulk of Lafe Tuxbray's house.

It was a gloomy place, still unfinished, being built of the native basalt. It had a tower and a parapet surrounding a flat roof. It looked like a fort and had undoubtedly been built with defense in mind.

Nearing it, Hoss observed lights on the flat below. There, he opined, would be located the bunkhouse, barn, sheds and corrals. And, despite the light, he had doubt about the men being inside. And for the same reason that he hadn't encountered a single guard. Hoss was peering into a barren interior, smelling of lime mortar, when he saw the thin crack of light. The low mutter of talk came to his ears. Treading like a ghost, he stepped through a gaping, drafty doorway.

If Lafe had fallen for the yarn his wounded hired hand had fetched him, he should be down there on the firing line, prepared by example to show the way to end the war. But Hoss doubted the man's stomach for it.

The crack of light proved to come from beside a hung blanket that closed off a rock-walled room. Halting there, know-

ing he could not move that curtain for a look without a good chance of detection, Hoss heard the snapping of an open fire.

Lafe Tuxbray's voice said: "Another one to yore health, Judge. It'll take a lot of drinks to give hope of makin' you healthy. Drinks in me, that is! Your friends is due to hit at me anytime now. They'll all die, then so will you."

A groan came from Judge Haycock.

With no knowledge of how many more men might be in that room, Hoss prepared to enter. And then he heard the crunch of gravel under boots.

Hoss wheeled, saw the shadow pass across the gray blob of a window. He had not yet moved to quit the vicinity of the doorway, when from the flat came a wild yell, the swift fusillade of two pistols.

The approaching Long T man hollered: "They've hit us, boss! Time to fight! Come a-runnin'." Hoss saw him wheel and dash away. The old cowman stepped through the curtain.

Judge Haycock lay on a bunk, trussed like a turkey. His face was drawn, his eyes sunken and staring at the bottle the standing Long T boss was just setting on a table. Backs to the open fireplace, against the evening damp, stood two hard-faced gun-hirelings, each jerking his gun in answer to the alarm outside. They saw Hoss as he swept through the portal.

They were two to his one. All the odds were against Hoss ever again sticking his bill into other men's plans. Their guns whipped up. Hoss killed them both.

Lafe Tuxbray, with a blistering curse, tabled the bottle, drew, whirled and fired, all in one explosive burst. The bullet caught Hoss high in the thigh as he swerved and shot. Both he and Lafe went down, then both leveled their weapons for another more deliberate and finishing shot. Hoss was first. His bullet struck home, tearing through Tuxbray's brain. Five shots had been fired. Three men were dead and Hoss was wounded.

Hoss got up, gritting his teeth from a wound he knew not to be serious for all its pain. He hobbled to the shaken judge, who murmured: "Thank God you got here, Hoss!" Hoss handed him the bottle and watched him empty it.

The lawyer accepted the carbine from Hoss and they went outside to the bluff edge, from where they could see the horsemen milling for the chase. The two friends stood there, emptying the weapons into those massed riders who, if they noticed the flashes at all, must have supposed it was Tuxbray and the sheriff firing at their enemies. Riderless ponies slanted off into the stormy night, under that fusillade.

Having emptied the magazines, they cast the useless weapons aside, mounted two of the three ponies tied at the side of the unfinished house, and lit off up the ridge to circle the ambush, already flaring into violence a half mile down the wash. Shrill screams of men were whipped away by the wind. The crack of six-shooters mingled with the sharper and heavier note of the .30-30's. And, above all, the bull bellows of Floursack Sims' gun.

After riding awhile in silence, Selim Haycock said: "I'm ashamed, Hoss. Though I've known you for thirty years, I've never ceased to predict that your next adventure would be your last. I knew I was right this time, with them setting a trap and you riding smack-dab into it. I nearly died, knowing I had to lie there and listen to them slaughter you. I hadn't the faith to believe that you were still the same wise old wolf, who could turn their lightning back on them. Forgive me, and accept my thanks."

"I accept the thanks," said Hoss, "for passing you that bottle when you was about dead for it. I forgive you everything but that you didn't leave me a drink, which I could sure use it the way this hip of mine's kicking up. You do any good in Globe?"

"Plenty. I talked some shame into Judge Burbank, threatened to have him impeached and disbarred and made him listen. He's a wreck, and he didn't have these gunmen to bolster up his shaky courage. He issued an injunction against his own order of ejectment—a doubtful legal procedure. But whatever you did is in the clear. If Tuxbray's death makes an end to this violence, you'll own the Long T and . . ."

"First thing," interrupted Hoss, "is to get over to that fight and let the Long T gunies know their boss is dead. Girdle the tree, I've allus said, an' the leaves fall off, one by one. We'll see."

But all sounds of battle died away before Hoss and the judge could circle and come in from behind. They hit the wash and found several wounded warriors returning slowly to the Rolling G, among them Justin Grimm with a bullet through the forearm. The ambush of Tuxbray men, their slaughter and flight, was pay enough for these wounds. Though sick with bullet-pain, the cripples could still cheer when the judge told them Tuxbray was dead.

That night was not the end of the Tranquil Valley war, as history records. But it was the end of it as far as Hoss Greer was concerned. Cole Tuxbray, Lafe's younger brother, continued the trouble when Grimm and O'Connell and Tanner, and the strong Pipestem outfit over in Grama Valley, barred his entry into the Traquil range with his woolly hordes.

The battle ebbed and flowed, men died, but the outcome was never in doubt. The stalwart little force that had defied Tuxbray's early power had reared a lasting barrier against sheep, with their blood. And Hoss himself had deadened the heart of the conspiracy when he warmed his gun in the unfinished structure that, to this day, is referred to as Tuxbray's Folly.

It's a secret! 6NX!

REG. U. S. PAT. OFF.

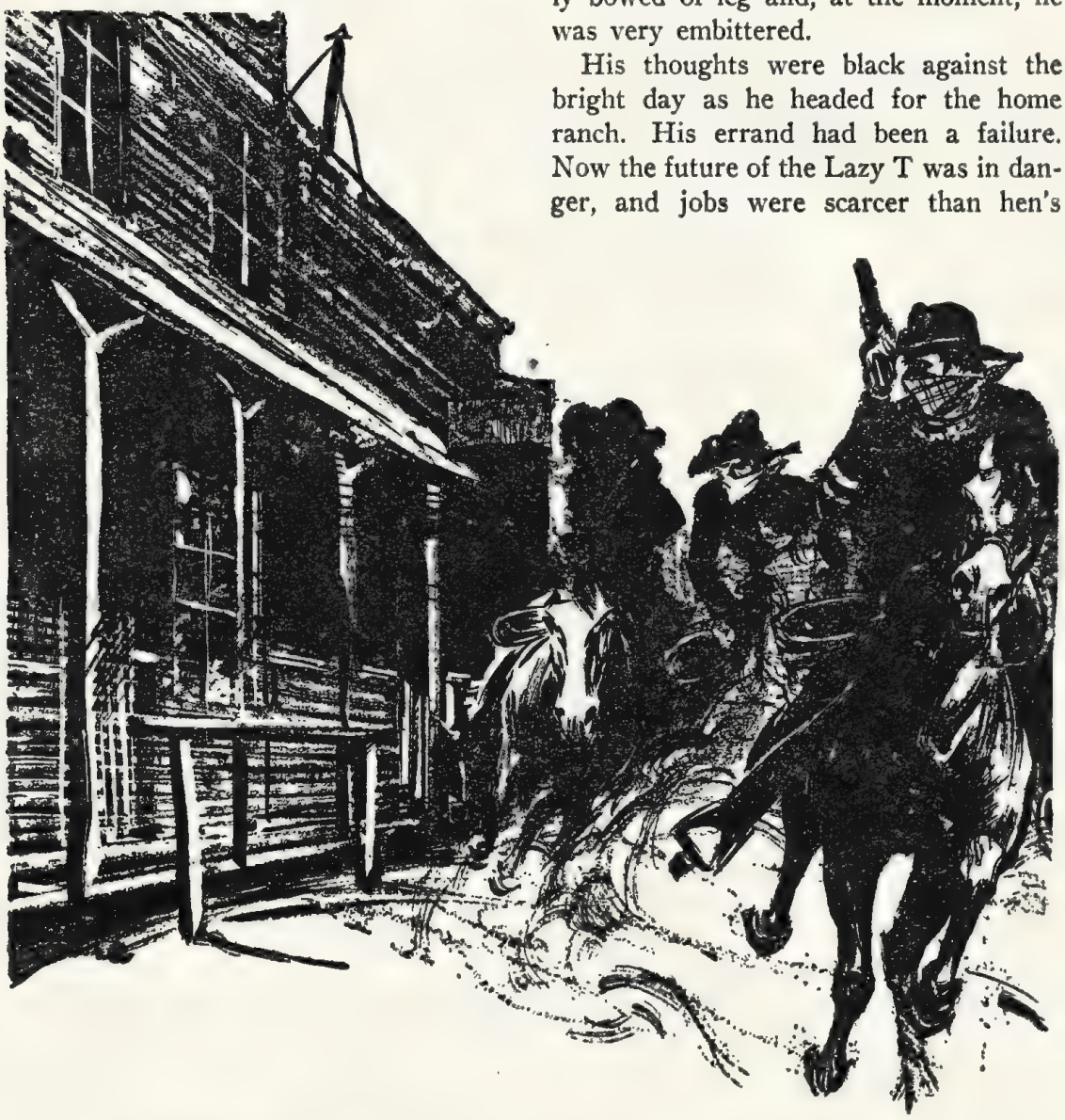
6NX is our new secret formula applied to the new Star Double Edge Blade—a combination of steel structure, hardening, tempering, grinding, honing and stropping which has produced the most remarkable double edge blade ever made. Buy a pack today!
Star Division, American Safety Razor Corp., Brooklyn, N. Y.

INTRODUCTORY OFFER
5 for 10¢ 15 for 25¢

STAR DOUBLE EDGE BLADES
FOR DOUBLE EDGE RAZORS!

SHORT-HANDED IN HELL!

A long-time fugitive from desert-country justice, the Duke rode back to that bloodstained range. Why should he cinch his chance for a killer's noose by picking off, one by one, the last cowhands that remained on the Lazy T—whose honest ramrod was the only friend he had left in the world?



CHAPTER ONE

Last of the Lazy T

DANNY DRAYTON rode out of Bugtown that noon with his jaw set hard, surprising the little dun cayuse with unaccustomed spur rowellings and hard hands upon the reins. Danny was young and straight-backed and slightly bowed of leg and, at the moment, he was very embittered.

His thoughts were black against the bright day as he headed for the home ranch. His errand had been a failure. Now the future of the Lazy T was in danger, and jobs were scarcer than hen's

★ ★ **By William R. Cox** ★ ★

teeth—unless a man wanted to work with Bob Snow's Running W tough hands. That strange, tight-lipped newcomer to the Crown Mountain country was winning his objective—the control of that entire range, the subjugation or route of the small ranchers, plus political and economic domination of Onyx County.

Here the road curved around a stand of cottonwoods and mesquite, and Danny could see Tomb Peak, a cylinder of red stone nestled into the Crown foothills like a fluted ornament, rising rigidly to the blue sky. Towards the Peak ran a dry gulch and on the other side of the road the trail led directly to the Lazy T. Beyond, to the west, all was now running W country, controlled by Bob Snow. Danny's way was south on the grassy trail, towards the Lazy T, where Mister Tomkins grimly awaited his news from the bankers.

It was just before he left the main road that he heard the sound of pounding hoofs in the dry gulch. He sat a moment, staring, listening intently. The horse, he thought, was shod behind, but not in front. There was an off beat to the rhythm of the hoofs, and certainly the man was riding hard and swift.

The raiders swept along the single street, amidst a clattering of hoofs, pistol shots, and shrill Rebel yells. . . .

Upon impulse, Danny turned into the sandy draw. His dun was unshod and light-footed and not liable to detection by the sound of his coming. Danny reached for the rifle in its scabbard and his freckled young features grew somber. There had been a strong rumor in town that outlaws were lurking in the sandstone caves at the foot of Tomb Peak; it was a certainty that the Lazy T had lost too many head of beef these past months.

Suddenly the flat sound of a rifle shot echoed along the gulch. Danny bent low over the pony's neck, clapping in the spurs. The dun flew along the bottom of the dried stream.

The sound of the two shod hoofs ahead became indistinct then faded altogether. The rider had left the draw, Danny knew. There was a turning a hundred yards ahead, and on the banks mesquite bushes grew thick. Danny was almost past the largest clump when he saw the man, his head and shoulders hanging over the bank of the gulch, his carbine useless at his side, arms outflung.

The dun slithered to a stop. Danny slid from the saddle, rifle ready, and cautiously mounted the bank. There was no sound save the stones rattling under his feet.

The dead man's head was bare, and his face turned away, but shock gripped Danny's nerves as he recognized the checkered shirt and the dark, curly hair. He came close, turned the body over.

It was Juan Tempe, all right. . . .

★

DANNY straightened, his eyes hard. The man lying before him was the segundo of the Lazy T, the boss of the *Mejicanos* who remained on the ranch. The American riders had deserted one by one as misfortune closed in, and only Juan had been able to hold the Mexicans in the face of the hostility of Snow's great Running W and the "accidents" which persisted in happening to the employees of Mister Tomkins and the Lazy T.

Danny went down the bank and climbed upon the dun pony. The tracks of the horse which had ridden ahead were plain to see, and he had been right about the shoeing of the hind feet. He urged the pony on, following the obvious trail, thinking only of revenge.

The trail turned off and went up the steep bank, and Danny followed. As his head came above the sloping bank of the dry coulee, his gaze fastened directly upon Tomb Peak, gleaming dull red in the hot sun. Straight as a string, the half-shod horse had aimed for that rocky, deserted spot.

As rage subsided in Danny Drayton, and his shrewd young brain began to function. It occurred to him that following this trail to its end might result in his own ignominious death at the hands of a marksman who could shoot from horseback and kill a man who waited in ambush. And he began to wonder why Juan Tempe had been over here, miles away from the Lazy T beef hand, which he should have been guarding in the fertile south range.

He rode slowly across the rocky ground where no tracks were visible, turning these and other things over in his mind. His sharp eyes discerned no movement at the foot of Tomb Peak, yet he knew in that fastness were natural caves and boulders large enough to shelter an army. The dun pony slowed and stopped, and Danny, let the reins dangle.

A voice called hoarsely, "All right, Danny—hold it. Don't make a move for your gun."

From behind a pile of rocks about twenty paces from Danny stepped a man with a drawn revolver. His step was even, his dark eyes steady beneath the black sombrero. "I don't want to hurt you, Danny," he went on. "But you'd better go back to the ranch."

Danny sat motionless, keeping his voice cool. "I was just thinking that myself, Duke."

The man was thick-bodied, of average height, and his face was lined with deep creases. He was dressed in dark clothing, carelessly, as though he gave no thought to himself. About him was an air of hard desperation.

He said, "I see you remember me."

"I couldn't forget you, even after ten years," Danny said. "I was there when you shot down Ben Tomkins, the boss' brother. I thought you must have been killed by now, Duke."

Duke Mulloy, gambler, gunman extraordinary and fugitive from Onyx County justice, said calmly, "I've been mighty close plenty times, Danny."

"You'll be closer when Mister Tomkins and the sheriff find out you're back," Danny told him. "Why did you want to go and shoot my segundo?"

Duke Mulloy considered, rubbing his chin with his left hand in a gesture Danny remembered. Then the gunman said, "I ain't aiming to answer questions right now. You turn that horse's tail behind him and ride for home, Danny. Stay away from Tomb Peak, and—watch your cattle."

Danny said, "Now wait, Duke. I want to. . . ."

Duke seemed to be listening. His whole attitude grew tense. He growled, "Get outa here, I tell you!" His gun jerked impatiently.

Still Danny hesitated.

Duke said, "Pronto!" and the revolver in his hand spat fire. A rock splinter flew from beneath the dun pony's belly, and Danny barely had time to snatch the trailing reins as the cayuse bolted.

There were other shots almost at once. Danny felt the lead winging by him. Lowering his head he clapped home the spurs and rode for the coulee. There were no more shots and Danny, angry but helpless, rode straight for the Lazy T and comparative safety.

★

MISTER TOMKINS was getting old, but his cheeks were red and his white hair plentiful. He was a big man and about him was an air of solid dignity which had resulted in the appelation "Mister", partly from amusement and partly from real deference to his sterling qualities. He sat on the verandah of the neat ranch house of his Lazy T spread and sighed.

"First we got Bob Snow to fight, then Duke Mulloy comes back. This comes mighty nigh putting a period to it, Danny. I swore I'd get the Duke if he ever come back."

Danny said, "Mister, you ought to let Sheriff Prewin take care of that. Duke's wanted for that raid, and for killing Ben."

"Ben was my brother," said Mister Tomkins quietly. "I reckon to take care of Duke myself, if possible. But we got to set guards on that herd in the south range. That's all we got left now, Danny. They rustled our cattle, branded our calves, killed our men. Bob Snow's gang has backed us against the wall. . . .

"You say the bank won't loan us any more money. That fat herd is our only hope. It'll stay fat all the way to Abilene if we start the drive early. If the men we got left will work, now that Juan's gone, we can round up the other few head and start right away. Duke can wait."

Danny's voice was very low. "Duke got the drop on me. But you won't have to meet him. Mister. I'll take care of him when the time comes. I'll match my draw against his in an even break."

He got up and walked to the corral to rope a horse. He chose a big black and got the hull on, then mounted and rode towards the south range. It was going to

be tough to break the news of Juan's death to the Mexican vaqueros, but he had to keep them, somehow, for the drive to Abilene.

As he rode, his memory traveled back to that time, ten years ago, when he had been an orphaned button in Bugtown, living here and there with kindly townspeople, scraping an existence out of the errands and odd jobs he could perform in exchange for board and lodging. And most of all, he remembered the famed Bugtown raid, when Mister Tomkins' brother Ben had been shot by Duke Mulloy. . . .

* * *

Ben Tomkins was very handsome. He was younger than Mister by fifteen years, and unlike his brother, he had never been a worker. He spent a lot of time in Bugtown, in the Green Nugget Saloon, playing faro and seven-up with Duke Mulloy and other wild youngsters, and dancing with the honkytonk girls. He was well liked by everyone, however, because of a winning personality and an open-handedness which passed for generosity.

Young Danny earned many a dollar running errands for Ben Tomkins, and spent many an hour admiring the handsome man's pearl-handled guns.

The raid came late one summer afternoon.

Ben was playing poker in the Green Nugget and Danny was watching from his corner, keeping out of sight and hearing, making himself inconspicuous as a button should. Pistol shots sounded in the street, there was a clattering of hoofs and some rebel yells, and the citizens of Bugtown reacted according to their various lights.

Most of them sought shelter, peering at the cause of the disturbance from safe places. Sheriff Prewin left the faro table with drawn gun and leaped for the street. Someone immediately shot Prewin in the hip and knocked him out of play.

Ben Tomkins followed Danny out the back door of the Nugget and up through the alley, which was directly opposite the bank. They saw the masked men on horseback and knew that this was business, and not hilarious cowboys shooting up the town. Danny slipped out and along to the hardware store with some dim idea of getting a rifle and making a fight. He was half way to his destination, hiding in a doorway, when Ben Tomkins went racing across the street.

There were four of the raiders in sight at that time, all disguised by bandannas across the lower part of their faces, all riding unbranded horses. Two others were in the bank. The four outlaws were slowly and carefully firing their guns up and down the street, aiming at anything that moved, even a stray dog.

Ben shouted, "You damned fools, you can't get away with this!"

One of the gang wheeled his horse. Danny noted with horror that Ben had not drawn his gun. The raider snapped, "Get back in there, Ben!"

The voice of the masked man was hoarse. He was thick-bodied and his movements were jerky, almost nervous. Just at that moment, two men came out of the bank, carrying sacks.

The man in the lead was tall and stooped. He was cadaverously thin, and his walk was that of a man who had not spent most of his life in the saddle, his long legs, springing a little at the knees, covering ground easily and swiftly. It was this man who commanded young Danny Drayton's attention, although at the time Danny could never in the world have told why.

Ben shouted something else which was drowned by gunfire. The thick-bodied man answered him, holding the revolver pointed in Ben's general direction. The tall man on the walk handed the bag over

to his companion, who tied it and his own burden to a big, gray horse.

Ben called, "Damn you, drop that money and get out of here! I'll—"

Ben went for his pearl-handled gun then, right out there in the street, when no one else in the town had dared to take a shot at the invaders, and with enemy artillery already trained on him.

His first shot caught the nearest bandit in the head. He went down.

Danny, his errand forgotten, froze to the wall, his bulging gaze fixed upon the scene. The horse of the thick-bodied man shied, destroying his aim. The tall, lean man threw a leg over the gray and came out with a short-barreled gun, the like of which Danny had never before seen. Other shots came from the remaining bandits, all aimed at Ben.

Snarling bullets knocked Ben to his knees. Yet he aimed coolly at the thick-bodied man. By some freak, his shot cut across the other's face, tearing the bandanna from his features.

To Danny's right a voice muttered, "Duke Mulloy! Got *him* spotted, anyway."

It was Sheriff Prewin. In falling, he had dropped his gun, which had slithered away from him. He was crawling for it now, leaving a trail of blood in the dust behind him. A heavy slug had cracked his hip bone, but he was trying for that gun. Danny leaped from his concealment and grabbed the weapon, handing it to the official.

Without looking up, Prewin muttered, "Thanks, button. I got to get some of 'em!"

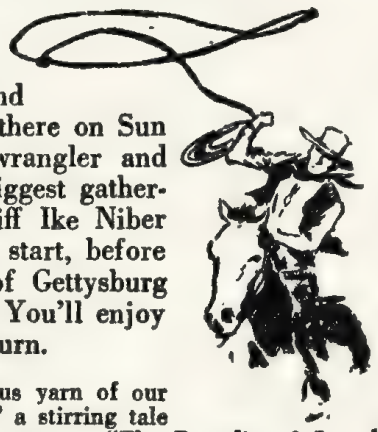
He propped himself against the wall and took perfect aim at the man on the gray horse, the one with the money bags. It was all happening so swiftly that Danny had lost track of the heroic Ben Tomkins.

When he looked back, Duke Mulloy was firing his gun. The hard face, young but dissipated, was black with rage. Ben Tomkins was flat on his back. This last shot of Duke's threw up dirt yards from Ben's prone body. And now the tall bandit's gun was smoking.

The gray made a leap, and Prewin missed the tall man, Danny saw. Another bandit came within range, and without changing aim, Prewin drilled him through the body.

The sheriff said, "Dammit, I missed the hombre with the money!"

"ROUND-UP AT SUN PRAIRIE"



Circle C, Circle Diamond, Bear Paw Pool, Cross J and Milner Square—five big round-up outfits all camped there on Sun Prairie—each with its own wagon boss, its horse wrangler and nighthawk, cook and crew of cowhands. It was the biggest gatherment Montana had ever seen—and grizzled old Sheriff Ike Niber told Humpy Jack that he looked for a gun ruckus to start, before the range was worked, that would make the battle of Gettysburg look like a schoolmarms' picnic. It started, all right. You'll enjoy this rip-roaring saga of the cow country by Walt Coburn.

Plus: "Tanks Ain't Horses" by Frederick Wilkins, a glorious yarn of our new mechanized forces; Walter Havighurst's "First Command," a stirring tale of the merchant convoys; "The Drumlin of Joe Tom" by Thomas H. Raddall, an unusual story of gold mining in Nova Scotia; the next thrilling installment of "Live by the Sword" by F. R. Buckley; other great fact and fiction features—and the usual departments found only in *Adventure*.

APRIL issue on sale MARCH 11th.

Adventure 15c

Duke Mulloy was riding a fine mustang with a long black tail which switched around as the animal cavorted. Danny knew the Duke well, knew him for a hard-drinking, gambling cowman who had held top-hand jobs all over the cow-country, but could never settle down long enough to amount to anything. Everyone in Bugtown knew and feared Duke's harsh temper, his quick and ready guns, but no one had him figured as an outlaw.

Prewin tried again, but his aim was bad. The gray horse was looping it out of town and Duke Mulloy was right behind. Other citizens were coming with their arms now. The two remaining raiders tried to make a running battle of it. Prewin shot his second man. Someone put a bullet through the heart of the fourth.

Then it was over, just like that, and the sun was still shining. Fifteen minutes covered the whole affair, from the time the shots first sounded until the two bandits escaped and the other four, and Ben Tomkins, lay dead in the middle of Bugtown's one main street.

Danny stood, his mouth half open, his terrified eyes fastened upon the handsome, pallid face of Ben Tomkins. His grief had been so genuine that later Mister Tomkins had taken him home and installed him upon the Lazy T. Danny had never left the pleasant ranch in the valley, had become the right bower of Mister Tomkin .

* * *

Oh, yes, Danny remembered every tragic detail of that day. He could close his eyes and reconstruct the scene from the beginning to the bitter end. The years had somewhat alleviated his pain at the death of Ben Tomkins, who had been kind to him, but he would never forget that Duke Mulloy had killed his benefactor.

And now Duke had killed Juan Tempe —but had spared Danny's life. It did not make sense. And Duke had gained the drop on Danny, humiliating him to the depths of his young soul.

Well, all in good time. If Mister Tomkins could wait until after the round-up, so could Danny. Sometime the occasion would arise when he could match his draw with Duke's.

He rode into the south range where the four vaqueros sat their horses in great indolence. Each was armed to the teeth, each posted to keep the herd in control at all times.

Danny called them in for a conference. Briefly he told them that Juan had been killed, that he was expecting them to carry on. He picked out Miguel Caliente to be segundo. He harangued them about the rewards at Abilene, when the beef-herd should be sold, told them he was going to town to hire more help that afternoon.

They listened in silence. The fat herd, which had prospered greatly on the fertile graze of the Lazy T south range, chewed placidly like the well fed beasts they were.

Miguel said, "It is not good, eh?"

Danny hesitated, then he said frankly, "No. It's not good. But if we fight it out, we'll all make plenty dinero."

Miguel nodded. "Señor Mister Tomkins is good. We will stay."

They all agreed, but their glances were wary as they returned to their positions. To the west lay Bob Snow's Running W and there rode his tough, hard-bitten gang of ex-rustlers who doted upon shooting *Mejicanos*. Danny shook his head and cut over the flats, headed toward Bugtown.

CHAPTER TWO

Midnight Raiders!

DANNY DRAYTON leaned against the wall of the barber shop, hooking his thumbs in his sagging cartridge belt. The butt of his

.44 was close to his right hand. His brown eyes narrowed to pinpoints and his hat tilted back on his round, newly-cropped skull.

There was no help for the Lazy T in Bugtown. Danny has despatched a friendly Mexican towards the Border with a plea for aid from the ranches to the south, but it would take time to bring in a sufficient number of riders for the round-up. It looked as though the fat beeves on the south range would not only be the mainstay of the Lazy T herd—but all of it. And it was not enough.

Bob Snow and three of his men swaggered out of the Green Nugget and went into the honkytonk next door, and Danny did not move from his spot in front of the barber shop. Within him was seething all the rage that had been building up in him for the past several months. He stared at Snow's straight back, clad in the ornate buckskin which he affected, at the long, blond hair which Snow wore frontiersman fashion, to his shoulders.

Tick Tuitte, Snow's foreman, One Horse Joe and Sloppy Pete Roller, Snow's constant bodyguards, as usual followed their boss closely, their guns in their hands.

It was strange, Danny thought, how the tall, sardonic Snow had come to the range, and in four years had established himself as the cattle king of Onyx County. Despite the man's cultivation of frontier haircut, his doeskin pants and beaded buckskin jacket, Snow was pretty much a greenhorn tenderfoot. A tough one, however, even though his clipped speech betrayed Eastern origin, and there was about him none of the open-handed generosity of the typical cowman.

Tuitte and the others were little better than rustlers when Snow hired them, and, Danny thought bitterly, they were still at their trade. Lazy T stock had suffered less than that of others, less determined ranchers than Mister Tomkins. Snow had brought in a large herd of his own from over Texas way, and then he had begun to spread all over the range. The man had an appetite for power and money which seemed insatiable.

After awhile the four men reappeared and started down the board walk towards Danny. Snow walked in advance, his sharp features cold and alert. Men spoke to them coldly, receiving only nods and grunts in response. Snow was a potentate, not a neighbor.

Tuitte increased his pace, drew abreast of Snow and pointed at Danny, saying something in the tall man's ear. Snow nodded and the four kept coming, only now there was menace in every step of their approach.

Anger rose higher in Danny Drayton. He was alone and hopelessly outnumbered, but the desire for conflict came upon him. Deliberately he braced his shoulders against the wall, gathering himself for swift action. His dark eyes stared contemptuously at the approaching quartette.

Prewin, he knew, was out of town, because he had looked for the old sheriff to tell him about Juan Tempe. In Bugtown only the grizzled lawman dared face Bob Snow and the Running W gang. But now Danny was going to remain alone, and he knew there would be a ruckus. He felt like having one himself. He was scared a little, away down deep, but his nerves were stone cold.

Snow paused five paces away. The three ranged behind the tall rancher—short bow-legged Tuitte, pockmarked One Horse Joe and the whiskered Sloppy Pete. Their eyes stared truculently; the guns upon their lean flanks were tied low and slanted forward.

At least they were squinting against the sun, Danny thought. He had been careful to get the blazing orb at his back. If he could tell which one of them would draw first, he'd have an even chance to down two of the four.

Not all of them would cut down on him at once, because not even Bob Snow could get away with that. One of the crowd would challenge him, and when Danny drew, another would cut down on him, later swearing that Danny was the agressor. And it was all cut-and-dried, planned in advance.

★

SNOW opened his mouth to speak, but Danny was before him. Danny said, "You big cattle-stealing coyote, go ahead and make your play without palaver."

Snow's eyes widened. He said, "You've got plenty of nerve, Drayton."

"I'm not scared of you and your murderers," said Danny. "You've run this county long enough."

"I offered to buy the Lazy T," said Snow. "Your boss was too mean to sell. I just want to warn you to clear out."

"Don't soft-soap me," said Danny. "You and your thieves have cleared the range, but I don't scare."

Snow glanced at Tick Tuitte. The bow-legged foreman of the Running W dropped his right hand to the butt of his gun.

Danny's draw was a thing of beauty. Without moving from the wall, his right arm swerved to his side and came up with the gun in his fist, pointing square at Snow's middle.

Danny said, "Now go ahead, gents. I'm taking Snow with me. Maybe I'll take another of you along, too. Go ahead and start the ball a-rollin'."

Snow said, "Wait!"

The sun slanted a little lower, illuminating the thin, cold features of the man, lighting up the long, blond hair which fell to his shoulders. His gray eyes were unafraid. He was a plenty cold proposition, this transplanted mystery man from somewhere back East.

Snow said, "Brave and quick, Drayton. We didn't mean to kill you. I just wanted to tell you that we're taking over the Lazy T, one way or another. We . . . . "

The tall rancher made a step sideways, blocking Danny's view of Tuitte. The bow-legged man snatched out his gun. Danny could have fired, could have cut Snow down with ease before Tuitte got his Colt loose. But something stayed Danny's hand—inability to cut down on an unarmed foe, reluctance to take life, something deep inside which revolted at violence and bloodshed.

Sloppy Pete and One Horse had their guns out too, now. Danny stood there, feeling very foolish. Twice in two days now, he had allowed men to get the drop on him. This time it looked like the finish. He did not for a moment believe in the parleying attitude of Bob Snow.

Snow's voice became hard as granite. "You see, Drayton, you're not cut out for range war. You haven't the guts to kill. You're not the type. You'd better clear out while you're alive."

Tick Tuitte grated, "He ain't goin' out alive. He can't call me a rustler and live."

The foreman's gun came up level, aiming at Danny's middle. Danny's own finger tightened on the trigger. Sloppy Pete shifted to get past his boss, and out of the corner of his eye Danny recognized the danger from that source.

He could act, now that he was threatened. He dropped on one knee and swung his six-shooter. He fired once at Sloppy Pete, holding the gun straight and steady. He saw Pete slump over, saw Pete's gun spit flame and smoke as the bullet went wild. He swiveled back to take one shot at Snow or Tuitte as lead cut the wall behind him, and he knew Tuitte was firing, but missing.

A stentorian voice from alongside the barber shop yelled, "Give 'em hell, Danny!"

A shot cracked across Danny's shoul-

der, caught One Horse in the neck and spun him around like a top. Danny trained on Snow.

The tall rancher was backing away, his gun still undrawn, his hands raised. His strangely clipped accents said, "I didn't start this. I'm not fighting!"

Tuitte promptly holstered his own weapon, seizing One Horse, helping the injured man back towards the Green Nugget. Danny stood holding his gun, unable to shoot men who retreated. Snow and Tuitte got One Horse on a cayuse in front of the saloon, and holding him between them, managed to mount. They rode swiftly out of town.

Danny scratched the back of his head with the smoking muzzle of his gun and said, "Well I'll be switched! I never heard of such goin's on in all my life."

He turned to address his unknown benefactor, the man who had turned the tide with the shot over Danny's shoulder.

There was no one in sight. Danny peered around the corner of the building and saw a black horse riding across country. In the saddle was a thick-bodied man who bent low, spurring the willing steed.

Danny said bewilderedly, "It gets worse and worse! If that ain't Duke Mulloy, I'm a Chinaman. Now what can a man make out of that?"

★

LATE that afternoon Danny returned to the Lazy T. Samson, the colored cook, said, "Mist' Tomkins went to'ards Tomb Peak. He seen smoke over yonder and thought 'at Duke Mulloy moughtbe there. Tooken his Sharp's buffalo gun, too."

Danny swore to himself, wheeling the black, and spurred back over the trail to the man road. A clash between Mister Tomkins and Duke Mulloy was the last thing he wanted at this time, or until he could come face to face with the Duke and ask some questions.

All the way out to the ranch Danny had been working his brain overtime, wondering about the Duke. He had thought back again to the Bugtown raid, going over every step of what his fine memory had retained. There was no doubt that Duke had been one of the two bandits who escaped with the money. Sheriff Prewin's shot, tearing away the disguise from his face, had given the Duke clean getaway. Yet there was one thing. . . .

And Duke had practically admitted shooting Juan Tempe, or at least had not denied it. Danny needed only to look at Duke's black horse to see that only it's hind hoofs were shod.

Yet the Duke had not only failed to kill Danny when he had the chance, but had warned him to watch the Lazy T cattle. And now he'd backed him against Snow's gun-hands. Danny suddenly remembered the herd in the south range, the four nervous Mexicans on guard, the rapid retreat of Snow and his riders from the ruckus in town. He hesitated, reining in the horse on the dusty main road, staring over at Tomb Peak, glowing red in the afternoon sun.

A rider came around the bend from the west, heading for Bugtown. Danny recognized Sheriff Prewin's bony gray, and heaved a sigh of relief. The sheriff trotted up, holding a hand aloft in greeting. He was an old man now, still carrying the limp from the bullet which had shattered his hip years ago in the Bugtown raid. He had a great, hooked nose, a white, flowing mustache and a rock-hard chin.

He said, "You look like you're in a sweat, Danny."

"You'll be in somethin' worse," said Danny grimly, "when I tell you about it." He blurted out the whole story of Duke Mulloy's return.

Sheriff Prewin's thin hand stroked the white mustachio down to its drooping

ends. His soft voice was dry. "So! A couple dead men already. You say Mister's after him?"

"Will you follow him, out there?" asked Danny. "I'm worried about the herd. I can't get men to make the round-up for a week, anyway. Snow threatened us, Sheriff. He might mean to run them off tonight."

Sheriff Prewin nodded. "I'll go out Tomb Peak way. There's a warrant still out for Mulloy. I reckon I can find Mister out there. And about Snow—I'll take action soon as I can raise a posse."

Danny suddenly pleaded, "Don't kill the Duke. He saved my life today. Give him a chance—maybe something can be done about him."

"He killed Ben Tomkins," said the sheriff sternly. "Whatever he's done since, he's got to pay for that. He was in the raid—you saw him yourself that day!"

Danny said, "Please give him a chance, Sheriff. I—I want to try to recollect some more about that raid."

Prewin said, "I aim to bring him in for trial, of course. But you know the Duke. He'll fight."

The lean officer waved and rode into the dry coulee, heading for Tomb Peak. Danny knew the old lawman never failed to get his man, dead or alive. With Mister Tomkins out on the prowl toting the Sharps, and the Sheriff filled with his sense of duty, Duke Mulloy would be in a tight if he was hiding in the caves about the Tomb.

Nevertheless, there was that south herd. Danny rode swiftly to the ranch and ascertained that all was quiet there. Samson was a courageous Negro with a cool head, and no harm would come to the ranch house, Danny thought. It was the cattle and the Mexican riders who might stampede, given slight encouragement.

The shadows were lengthening beyond the slope which led down to the Running W spread, as Danny rode onto the holding ground on the south range. Miguel Caliente's hands were nervous, but he rode close and said, "All has been quiet," Señor Dannee."

The other three were riding point. Danny said, "We'll have to bring out the chuck wagon and camp here tonight. Send a man back for Samson. I'll take his place until the food comes out."

Miguel said in a low voice, "You think something will happen tonight, no?"

"I'm taking no chances," said Danny shortly.

Miguel's dark eyes rolled in his head. He said nothing, however, riding away to despatch the messenger to Samson. Danny rode the dun around the herd, his mind busy at reconstructing the old scene of the Bugtown raid, speculating on the whereabouts of Mister Tomkins and the sheriff, wondering why Duke Mulloy had returned willingly to a county where a warrant was out for his arrest.

Samson arrived, tooling the chuck wagon. The cook had seen no sign of Mister Tomkins nor the Sheriff. It was dark when the fire was made and the biscuits and steaks began to give off the aroma which brought the hungry men loping.

Danny talked to them while they ate. He said, "If the cattle stampede, all I want you to do is round them up. I don't expect you to do any fighting unless someone attacks you and you have to save yourselves. This herd is all Mister Tomkins owns that he can count on. We got to save it."

The Mexicans were good workers, splendid riders, fine cow-hands. But Danny did not count too much on their loyalty, for he knew the fear of Bob Snow's brutal drivers, headed by Tick Tuitte and One Horse, hung heavy over their heads. He told them of the gun-fight in town, explaining that Sloppy Pete was probably dead and One Horse Joe wounded.

The *Mejicano* hands perked up considerably.

Miguel said, "That Tuitte, he got twenty men behind him."

Danny said furiously, "If he had a hundred, he can't run off this herd! You savvy? I'll gut-shoot you myself if you let them stampede these cattle!"

Miguel bobbed his head, a flashing smile lighting his features. "We ride, Señor Danny. We not fight Tuitte and his gang, mebbe. But we ride."

Danny had to be satisfied with that.

★

THE moon was almost full, but clouds scudded low in the sky and it would be a spooky night. He bolted biscuits, steak and black coffee and mounted. He rode around the herd, endlessly checking the points. The cattle seemed quiet enough. In the heavens the clouds thickened, heat lightning split the blackness. Danny cursed savagely; even the elements seemed against him. The night wore on and still there was no sign from Mister Tomkins.

Once this herd was started, Danny knew, five men were scarcely enough to turn it. He rode in a wider circle, his ears cocked for the slightest sound, his rifle loose in the scabbard at his knee. If anyone came close enough to create a disturbance, he meant to stop them pronto, before the cattle could take alarm.

It was a desperate chance, if Snow really meant business. Tuitte's men could come from several directions, and although the cattle were well-fed and somnolent, a well-placed shot or flare of fire might start them. Danny fretted and under him the horse seemed to shy at every dim shape in the darkness.

It was close to ten o'clock, Danny reckoned, when the coyote howled. Danny listened, holding his breath. The sound came again, a hundred yards from the first howl, striking a different note. Neither of the animals was convincing to Danny's straining ears. He clutched his rifle, kneeing his mount out onto the plain, away from the herd.

At the sound of his horses' hoofs, men seemed to rise up from everywhere, so that the plain was full of them. A voice which he recognized as Tuitte's yelled, "Go in! Scatter and get in there!"

Danny fired the rifle, praying he was far enough away not to alarm the cattle. An answering shot, two hundred feet to the right cut the blackness with flame. Danny fired at the flash and heard a yell.

His horse was running hard, but Danny had no idea which way to turn. He saw a dim figure and fired his rifle again, and another yell told him that his luck was holding.

Tuitte's voice sounded close, shouting, "It's only that damned Drayton! Close in boys!"

Shots crackled and the horse faltered. Danny dismounted, let the staggering horse run on.

He crouched there, fumbling for cartridges in his belt. He had plenty of ammunition for both his Winchester and pistol. He was safe enough, barring accidents—but the cattle were endangered. If the Running W gang closed in now, it would be good-night Lazy T, and goodbye Danny Drayton.

Tuitte was between Danny and the herd now, and it was practically all over. Danny picked out the spot from where the voice seemed to come and fired again. Tuitte howled, "Get that Drayton! He's comin' too close! Damn this darkness! Why don't that moon come out?"

So the enveloping blackness was now on his side, Danny thought grimly. His Mexicans would either ride the herd or try to remain out of gunshot and sight. He was behind the attack, harrying them from the back. It could be worse, he thought.

The Running W riders were all around

the place. He caught sight of one leading his horse, trying to get in near the herd. He fired.

Guns barked from four sides and lead cut around Danny, singing through the grass, whining overhead. They were laying for his gun-flashes. They had spotted him.

Tuitte's voice had moved since Danny's last shot. It called, "Get Grayton first! Then we can take the cattle!"

CHAPTER THREE

"I'll See You in Hell First!"

DANNY retreated as fast as he could. He heard them coming after him, occasionally saw a form moving. They had abandoned their horses and were attacking afoot. The cattle were forgotten for the time being as the gang put every effort to removing Danny from their backs. It was good strategy upon Tuitte's part, yet it gave Danny time.

The trouble was that he could get no cover. The south range of the Lazy T was a huge, grassy plain, rich with fodder for the cattle, with neither tree or chapparel. Danny's only chance lay in gaining the tributary of the Snake River which fed the field with water. He heard men scrambling to his right and knew that they were heading him off from that scanty haven.

He shot three times, and the sounds of moving men ceased. He chuckled, moving in the cropped grass without noise. Bullets chopped about him. He took another shot in Tuitte's general direction, but knew he had not scored as the foreman's voice went on directing his forces. Danny wondered where Bob Snow was this night that the Lazy T was to lose its last ace.

The stream was a couple of hundred yards to his rear, Danny figured. If he could lure the invaders to its banks, he might have a chance of fighting from tree to tree among the sparse cottonwoods which grew there. He grasped his rifle firmly and started running, silently and swiftly.

Few shots came, for the forces of the Running W dared not take a chance upon enfilading their own men. Danny forbore to answer, seeking his objective with complete singlemindedness.

He almost ran full tilt into a tree. He stopped with outthrust hand and managed to get behind the trunk. There he settled down, his rifle ready, waiting to spot the first sound or movement of the enemy.

Up above, the clouds shifted as a breeze sprang up, and Danny's heart jumped into his throat. A gleam of light came through. He saw a man leaning forward, peering from under the wide brim of his hat. He raised his rifle, pressed the trigger and saw the man fall over sideways, dropping his gun. Then a dozen shots cut around the cottonwood and Danny knew he had to run for it.

He waited a moment, bent low and cut north, towards Running W property. He knew they would expect him to go the other way, in the direction of town, or from whence he might beat a roundabout retreat to the Lazy T ranch house.

One bullet took away his hat, but there seemed to be no other fire in that direction. He came upon a spreading oak and stopped in its shadow. The moon went back behind the fleecy bank of clouds.

The oak had a low, spreading branch which was no more than eight feet from the ground. Danny eyed it longingly as he listened for the footsteps of approaching men. A sudden sense of his loneliness, the desperation of his situation came in upon him. There were at least a dozen men hunting him. He had not a chance in the world of escaping.

Already they were going upstream and down, closing the trap upon him. They would beat up and down the creek until

he had to give himself away by shooting, then they would concentrate their fire. He might take several with him, but they were hard-bitten fighters who would make sure of him in the end. He leaned against the oak and his head throbbed as he sought for a way out.

From above him a voice said hoarsely, "Is that you, Danny?"

He almost jumped out of his skin, his rifle jerked automatically to his shoulder.

The voice said, "I had to be sure. Here, grab this."

Danny stared at the veil of darkness. A rifle barrel was thrust towards him. Mechanically, Danny grasped it, slinging his own gun to his belt. A strong pull gave him a lift, until he could reach the low limb of the oak. A hand reached down and boosted, and in a trice he was perched up out of sight.

The thick-bodied man said calmly, "I reckoned they would be out tonight after what they pulled in town today."

Danny said, "Duke! What in hell is your game?"

"To beat Bob Snow," said Duke Mulloy in his harsh voice. "To do it in such a way I'll have a chance in court when the time comes."

Danny said, "I knew you had something up your sleeve. I told Prewin. . . ."

"The Sheriff and Mister Tomkins are still lookin' for me, over Tomb Peak way," said Duke. "We could use 'em here, right now, but I couldn't afford to parley with 'em."

Danny said, "There's a dozen men down below. They're closing in on us right now."

Duke said, "I got an idea. Just let's be still for a minute or two."

They sat on the low limb, keeping their legs drawn up out of sight of anyone on the ground. A man came prowling, very cautious, along the bank of the stream. Duke put a hand on Danny's shoulder, cautioning him to silence.

The man had to pass under the branch to follow his course. He came closer, his rifle ready for action. Duke leaned over, flattening himself upon the tree limb, holding his rifle by the stock. The man obligingly stopped and listened.

Duke swung the rifle muzzle in a crashing blow. It cut through the sombrero of the man below, driving him forward, soundlessly, upon his face.

With amazing speed Duke swung down to the ground, seized the fallen Running W man and dragged him away from the tree.

He scarcely had time to regain his position with Danny's help before the second man came along, calling softly, "Red! Where you go?"

Danny was ready this time. His aim was excellent and the second victim collapsed like a rag doll.

Duke said, "Like shootin' fish in a barrel! Come on down. We can bushwhack the next one—if there is a next one."

They waited five minutes, but no one came. Duke said, "Now we can follow them up. We'll break toward the center and take what comes."

Danny said, "You think we got a chance against that whole mob?"

"If we're quiet," said Duke. "Just trail in easy-like."

The heavyset badman was calm as a lake, Danny thought. They moved along the river bank, came to the cottonwood behind which Danny had first taken shelter. Danny motioned and Duke followed him, taking the way back towards the cattle in the south range. There was no sign nor sound of the Running W men.

Suddenly, back by the water, Tuitte's low voice called, "Red! Jake!"

Another voice said, "They ain't come up. That damned kid got away clean!"

Tuitte was silent for a moment. Danny got his gun leveled at the sound of the voices. Duke whispered, "Give 'em a chance to bunch up. Then let 'er ride."

Someone said, "This is damn' queer, Tick."

"We shoulda had him an hour ago," complained another.

Tuitte said, "Shut up! Let him go. He's still runnin', prob'ly: Let's go back and take care of them steers."

Duke said, "Now!"

Danny felt his companion leap away from his side, spreading their two guns to eliminate risk. He turned loose the Winchester, firing it as fast as he could at the voices beside the stream. He heard men yell, heard Tuitte's voice carrying above the rest. He emptied his magazine, drew his six-shooter, expecting a rush. On his right, Duke's gun was also stilled.

There was no sound by the water. Danny took a chance, holstering his revolver and reloading his rifle with rapid fingers. He moved a little to the left, expecting an ambush. He had no way of knowing how many of his and Duke's shots had taken effect.

Moments passed. There was still no sound. After a while Danny began to realize that the Running W was headed home, that there was not one left to battle.

Immediately he cut back to the right, searching for Duke Mulloy, but there was no sound of the thick-bodied badman. Danny searched for a long while, out there in the darkness, and finally the moon peeked out and he was aware that Duke was gone.

He turned back, walking across the pasture. It was a long haul in his high-heeled boots, but he finally spied the herd, milling a little, but still in the same spot in which he had left them.

Miguel's voice said, "Stop! Who ees it?"

Danny said, "Ride 'em, cowboy!"

Miguel said, "*Madre de Dios!* I think you are dead!"

Danny said, "Clout me for a sheep-herder! I thought so too!"

THE ranch was dark. Danny felt his way around in the black night, gained the corral. Somehow he found a horse and wrestled a spare saddle upon it. He had to get out to Tomb Peak and find Mister Tomkins and the Sheriff. If he didn't—there'd be nothing worth living for.

He rode as quietly as possible down the dry wash. At the place where the tracks of the half-shod horse had turned off the day Juan Tempt was killed, he dismounted and led his horse carefully up the bank. There was no trail, but even in the darkness the bulk of Tomb Peak was an inky shadow standing high ahead. He cut his course for the landmark, stepping lightly, ready to seize his horse's nostrils at the faintest sound.

As he neared the Tomb, there were rock piles, tossed carelessly in Nature's off-hand manner, forming barricades and strange cairns. Danny moved among them until he saw the light of a fire flickering fitfully ahead, near the base of the Peak. He left the horse then, and crept forward afoot.

He traversed a hundred yards in this fashion, keeping an unusually large rock formation between him and the fire. He could distinguish several figures, now. There were men in a circle and one tall figure dominating the scene. Danny clung to the large pile of rocks and found himself fifty yards from the action which so interested him.

The voice carried clearly. It was Bob Snow talking, in his staccato speech. "It's no use, Tomkins. You might as well give up. We got your cattle, and I want that ranch."

Sheriff Prewin's voice drawled, "Reckon you mean to kill me. You couldn't leave me alive and get away with this. You know that, don't you?"

"You are eminently correct, Sheriff," said the cold voice. "I have a half dozen men itching to finish you. Meantime,

Tomkins, if you sign this bill of sale, you can count on your own life being spared."

Mister exploded, "I don't believe it. You got to kill us both. The hell with you, Snow!"

The rattle of horse's hoofs sounded in the night. Snow taunted, "That will be Tuitte, telling me your herd is stampeded, your Mexes on the run. Perhaps they got Drayton, too, if he was around. Drayton's only a chicken-hearted kid, you know."

The horse was going to pass close by. Danny flattened out in the shadows and waited. Tuitte was spurring his nag, riding like a maniac. He threw himself from the saddle and Danny saw with satisfaction that the foreman of the Running W was wearing a bloody bandage in lieu of a hat.

Tuitte panted, "Drayton got some help and run off our men. Turned a dozen guns on us from the bushes and killed Red and Jake and nicked four others. We couldn't get in to the herd."

Snow said, "Damn you for a blunderer!"

Danny stuck out his head, under cover of the distraction, taking a good look. Mister Tomkins and the sheriff were tied up, lying side by side on the far edge of the fire. There were eight men with Snow. Tuitte was crouching, staring at the captives.

The foreman said, "You don't need the cattle if you got Tomkins. Heat some irons! I'll make him do what you want!"

Snow said, "I hoped that would not be necessary. You and your tough riders!"

The tall man motioned towards a couple of running irons that lay beside the fire, and Tuitte thrust them hastily into the embers. "You got to be quick! That damned Drayton and whoever chipped in with him might get ringy and start over thisaway."

Snow said, "They'll be watching the cattle. Tomkins, will you sign?"

Mister said, "I'll see you fried in hell first!"

CHAPTER FOUR

Gunsmoke Home-Coming

DANNY pondered, drawing a bead with his rifle. If he killed Snow, he wondered, would the others hightail it? Not while Tuitte was alive, he thought. He fingered the trigger of the Winchester, debating. He saw the irons glow hot, knew that he would have to make a decision at once.

The voice which cried down had become very familiar in the last two days. It said, "Hold everything, Snow! Reach for the sky! We got you surrounded!"

For a moment there was a tableau as Snow and his men froze in whatever attitude the voice had caught them. Upon the tall man's face was a curious, searching frown. Then, with incredible speed, Snow leaped out of the firelight and Tuitte kicked twice at the flaming sticks.

Danny fired low, aiming at Tuitte. He saw the foreman of the Running W leap into the air, sprawl across the fire. The light died down, but Danny let go again, this time at the nearest of Snow's men. A shot crashed from above and he knew Duke Mulloy had cut loose. Another of the Snow cohorts twisted and fell headlong.

Danny bent low and ran close, drawing his six-gun, trying desperately to get to Mister Tomkins and the sheriff before they could come to harm. He shot one of the remaining Running W gunmen in the head and was grazed by a bullet from another. He fired twice more, and saw the renegades take to their heels.

Then he was cutting the rawhide thongs which bound the two old men, and Mister Tomkins was swearing in three languages —English, Spanish and Cherokee.

The sheriff was drawling, "That was

nice work, Danny, but who was our friend up above?"

"Duke Mulloy!" panted Danny. "I heard him going over this way. Quick—let's follow him."

He plunged for the spot where Bob Snow had disappeared. The moon, fickle that whole night, elected this opportune moment to reappear in sudden splendor. Mister and the sheriff hobbled as fast as their stiffened and cramped legs would allow.

Beyond the rock pile which had been Danny's haven, two men were locked in a tight embrace. Danny ran in, his revolver poised to strike. Snow was stronger than he looked. and Danny saw a long-bladed Bowie knife flash in his hand.

Duke was holding the wrist of Snow's knife-hand. As the three came running, they saw the Duke make a quick backward step, then deliberately throw himself on the ground, rolling on his shoulders. He did not, however, relinquish the grasp on the wrist of his adversary.

Snow came flying, and for one second it seemed as if the blade of the Bowie must plunge into Duke's body. Danny had his gun ready to fire, when Duke's boots came up. The sharp heels dug into Snow's middle as he flew in the air above the prone man. Duke kicked hard, never letting go of that wrist.

Snow's heels spun over his head, his body lengthening. Duke pulled down hard, and the full length of Snow's long form battered down on the rocks. Then for a moment there was no sound save the far-off echoes of the fleeing remainder of Snow's Running W hands.

Duke sat up. There was blood upon his shoulder where the knife had nicked him. He looked around at the Sheriff and said calmly, "Well. Now I got him, I'm ready to go in with him."

Prewin said slowly, "What do you mean, Duke?"

Danny cried, "Wait a minute! I got it! Bob Snow was the tall man, the one with the Tenderfoot walk! He was the leader of the gang in the Bugtown raid!"

Duke Mulloy said, "You sure have got a good memory, Danny. I was hoping you saw the shot that downed Ben Tomkins."

"I didn't," said Danny. "But I remember you missed him one time. And Snow's gun was smoking!"

"You're damn right," said Duke flatly. "Snow engineered that whole deal. I was in on it, I admit. But I never shot anyone and never tried to. Ben recognized me—we were friends. He tried to stop me, get me out of it. But it was too late. Then Snow came out and Ben made his fool play. Snow shot him."

Sheriff Prewin said, "Mebbeso. I never saw you shoot Ben. I was crawlin' towards my gun. Danny picked it up and give it to me. Reckon we just took it for granted you shot Ben on account of he yelled at you."

"When Snow comes to," said Duke mildly, "maybe he'll admit it. That is, if you're a mind to give me a chance to make him talk."

Danny said, "Duke pulled me out, Mister. Over yonder, when Tuitte thought we had a dozen guns against him, there was only Duke and me."

Mister Tomkins said, *"Hrrrmph!* Well . . . !"

Danny said, "Is that Snow's horse?"

The animal nickered, coming close at sight of his master lying motionless in the moonlight. Danny seized the reins and brought him on. Then he walked around, picking up one front foot and one rear.

He said excitedly, "It was Snow killed Juan Tempe, wasn't it, Duke? And you knew he was lying up here waiting for me, so you stopped me. Is that it?"

"Yep," said Duke. "I figured you could get him on that, Sheriff. He had a hide-out up here where he could watch what was goin' on at the Lazy T—get a good

view from half way up Tomb Peak. Snow had a man there all the time. Your Mex musta seen somethin' and got nosey. Snow shot him from across the gulch, then ducked when he saw Danny comin'.

"I was too late to save the Mex, but I stopped Danny, then ran to cover in a place I know. This country's mine, not Snow's. I knew it better'n him. I knew his plans all the time, because I was hornin' my ear in when he didn't expect it."

Sheriff Prewin said, "What about the bank money, Duke?"

For the first time, the thick-bodied man flinched. He said, "The night after we got away from Bugtown, Snow batted me over the ear while I was asleep and made a getaway. He thought he killed me."

"Nice feller," said Prewin dryly. "Where you been all this time, Duke? We missed you around here."

"In the pen," said Duke. "I got picked up trying to hold up a stage over in Texas. I spent nine and a half years behind the bars, Sheriff. I did my bit and I'll do another one, but I got to get straight with the world—and with Bob Snow!"

BOB SNOW was sitting up, his back against the base of Tomb Peak. He said, "Try and prove it—try and prove anything. Tuitte's dead. The rest of my men will be long gone by now. I deny everything. You can't lay a finger on me!"

Sheriff Prewin said sadly, "He's right. There ain't but one thing to do, and I guess we better get to it."

"What's that?" asked Mister Tomkins suspiciously.

"Leave him here with Duke," said the sheriff. "Turn him loose and leave Duke and him settle it. Comes a time when the Law just can't handle scoundrels. We know he tried to run off your cattle—we know what he done to others in this county. Maybe we can't prove he was in the raid, or that he shot Ben. But we can leave Duke and him to decide it."

Snow said, "Duke Mulloy's the real criminal! You know he was in the Bugtown raid. It's your sworn duty to take him in."

"Oh, we'll get him—or you—sooner or later," shrugged the sheriff. "Well, men, reckon we'll be gettin' along. Suit you, Duke?"

FIFTEEN WESTERN TALES

15 STORIES 15 CENTS

"HELL ON THE HOOF"

LIKE a swollen river before the melting snows it grew—wild, turbulent, lawless—Virginia City! . . . . . Where the strong stole from the weak and the smart stole from the strong. . . . Where tight-lipped men gambled their blood and their sweat and their gold against the fabulous silver hoards of the Comstock Lode. . . .

And into that storm of hell and damnation one day rode Luke Starr, following a fierce trail of adventure that was to see him become a millionaire and a pauper, an honest prospector and an outlaw—all in one night! . . . Here is a novel you will not forget—M. Howard Lane's blood-and-silver saga of the roaring West!

Also In This Issue:

"The Last Ride Of Tim Shane" by James Shaffer; "Kill No More" by John B. Starr; plus twelve other fact and fiction stories of gun-swept trails by your favorite top-hand authors.

April Issue On Sale Now!

Duke grinned. It was the first time Danny had seen him smile, and he looked quite youthful and happy. He said, "It's all I ask in this world, Sheriff! And I think you're doin' us all a favor."

Prewin reached down and slashed the rope from Snow's wrists. The tall man stood with his back to the wall.

The sheriff looked at him a moment and then said, "I wouldn't want to be you, Snow. A man's suffered as much as Duke is sure to be plumb short on patience. Downright peevish, in fact!"

"I'll take my chances, Sheriff," Snow said in his clipped, cold voice.

Danny went with his chin on his shoulder. He saw Snow standing there. Duke, his shoulders square, was watching the tall man. Both were without weapons. Mister Tomkins and the sheriff hustled along, and Danny hustled right along with them.

Mister Tomkins said, "Duke's telling the truth, Sheriff."

"Yep," said the old man. "Reckon we're far enough away. Let's light."

They sat upon scattered rocks and lit cigarettes. The sheriff said, "T'won't take long. Yep, Duke's tellin' the truth. Funny how a man can pay his debt to the law, then—instead of figgerin' his slate's plumb clean, he'll come back and try t' do the right thing. Shows what stuff there can be in a man."

Danny said, "I can't stand this. Duke saved me three times from being killed. Snow's a snake."

"Sho' now," said the sheriff. "Don't get excited, young 'un. It'll be all right before you know it."

"But you got to take him! You got a warrant for him!" persisted Danny. "He was in the raid—he admits it."

For a moment there was silence. Then Prewin said, "You're makin' a round-up tomorrow, ain't you Mister?"

Tomkins said, "That's right."

"Takin' the herd outa the state, ain't you?"

"Cert'ny," said Mister Tomkins, his voice calm and even.

"Nobody is goin' to check on your men," said the sheriff. "If you want to hire an extra hand to hit the trail to Abilene, there won't nobody say a word. An extra man might come in handy, too."

Danny said, "Oh . . . . "

The sheriff stood up, his keen old ears had caught the first sound of approaching footsteps. They came slowly, as though a man was staggering. Snow must have put up an awful fight, thought Danny. He wiped his sweaty palms on the side of his levis.

Then he stared. Coming across a patch of moonlight was Duke Mulloy, and slung across his shoulder was Snow's limp figure. The Duke came up to them and dumped Bob Snow at the sheriff's feet. From his breast pocket, Duke took a sheet of white paper.

"Here's the deed he tried to get Mister to sign," said Duke. "His confession's on the back of it. He was easy, Sheriff. Honest!"

Danny said, "Come on, Duke. Don't talk to the sheriff. He don't even want to know you. Come on. . . . We got a herd to gather and drive up the trail."

Duke's heavy face turned from one to the other. Then he put out a hand to steady himself. Danny saw that he was all in, that he had been traveling on his nerve for some time.

Duke said, "I could use a meal and some sleep. Then I'm ready for anything you gentlemen suggest."

Danny wouldn't let anyone else touch the thick-chested man. He put his own sturdy young shoulder under Duke's arm and led him down the trail to the Lazy T. Danny had learned something, and he had gained something. Danny was mighty glad the Duke had come home. . . .

THE END

"THE RUSTLING OF THE LEAVES"

That's what they called the whispers that sifted along the crooked length of that hidden highway called the Old Outlaw Trail. . . . And no more dramatic or colorful story was sent out along that twisted path of hunted men than—

"THE SAGA OF THE OUTLAW KID"

A hard-hitting Western novel

by Walt Coburn

It tells of the murderous renegade, Long Red, who died violently in the dark for bloodstained Wells Fargo loot; of the strange badlands prophet called Bible Jones; and of the famous Missouri River feudists, Dad Matthews and Old Man Dawson who gave a nameless renegade orphan his first chance to live, to fight—and to die—like an honest cowpuncher!

Also such smashing sagas as "Tomahawk from Boston," by William R. Cox, "Wild One," by Robert E. Mahaffay, "Dangerous Bill's Last Stand," by Tom Roan, and other vigorous Western stories and features.

10¢ DIME ALL STORIES COMPLETE
WESTERN MAGAZINE
Buy your copy today at your newsstand!

★ JOHN IRONS' LAST

The outlaws . . . hustled the stolen beef right through to the U. P. at Green River. . . :

It was characteristic of Sudden John Irons, range detective, to ride openly and alone into that outlaw hideout at the Hole-in-the-Wall, carrying with him a blood-money warrant for the wild young outlaw he himself had raised . . . .

CHAPTER ONE

Blood-Grudge

THE cowman-rustler gun war at the Hole-in-the-Wall in Wyoming did not officially concern Sudden John Irons, for the Western Anti-Horse and Cow-Thief Association had no charity program. It did not horn in on the private troubles of the independent cattle pools, unless invited to do so—on a cash

★ ★ **A Dramatic Manhunt Novel** ★ ★

GUN-CHORE • By Dee Linford

basis, of course—and the Upper Powder River Pool showed no signs of calling in outside help.

It happened, however, that the Western Anti's lank inspector-at-large had a vested interest in this particular feud, and when nothing but silence greeted his voluntary offer to help, he rode into the little cow-town of Kaycee on the Middle Fork of the Powder and paid a perfunctory visit to

the man whose abysmal cussed orneriness lay behind the shooting.

"If you wasn't so much yore own man, there wouldn't be this trouble here, Judge," John Irons opined, coming to the point. "If you wasn't so set in yore contrary feudin' ways, you'd call it a bad job an' let me take over 'fore you lose yore pool job. I could git to Jimmy Kane an' talk a little sense inta him, if you'd listen to reason an' squash them trumped-up charges you've laid again' him. With Jimmy in our camp, we'd have yore pool back on its laigs. Then it wouldn't be any chore to mop up Cal Peoples an' his longrider rustler gang. . . . I can wind this fuss up for yu', pronto, Judge, if yu'll give me the chanct."

Judge T. Joe Cabanne, lawman, rancher, and president of the Powder River Pool, removed his cigar from his mouth, his feet from his spur-scarred desk.

"Abusin' me'll git you nowhere, John," he remarked, irascible and peevish. "I know you're spoilin' to horn in here an' sacrifice me, t' whitewash Jimmy Kane. But you ain't a-going to do it. Jimmy Kane's a stage robber an' a cow thief, besides all else he is. He's raised more than one man's share o' hell in this country, which is givin' him wagon room. An' as judge o' this here county an' head o' the local pool, I aim t' pay Jimmy off in his own coin."

"There wasn't a likelier, square-shootin'er hand on the Powder than Jimmy, till you took after him," the Association man contended, his voice as level as his steely gray eyes. "He's got a bee in his tail right now, an' thinks he cuts a fat one, ridin' with the Hole-in-the-Wall gang. But you an' yore cussedness an' feudin' put 'im there."

The judge stood up, angered. "That just ain't so, John Irons. It ain't me that's kept the feud alive an' goin'. For all them Kanes killed my only two boys, I've allus stood ready to let it drop. I took no action when Jimmy kilt my second boy, Jase. But when he started to botherin' Molly, my 'dopted daughter, it was too much. At that, I only ordered him off my place. It ain't my fault he's got to turn stage robber an' join Cal Peoples an' git them Hole-in-the-Wallers roiled up t' raid our cow herds."

John Irons grunted. "Yo're forgittin' somethin', ain't you, Judge? Forgittin' you sicc'd yore boy Jase—the same one that killed Jimmy's dad—onto Jimmy. An' Jimmy killed 'im. Forgittin' yu' crowded a resolution through yore pool, forbiddin' members to hire any hand that owned range of 'is own. You put over the idee that such action would cut down the rustlin' amongst the hands. An' you knew the whole time that it was Cal Peoples an' his longriders that was stealin' yore beef, an' not the range hands.

"You was strikin' at Jimmy, not the rustlers. You knew Jimmy had to hire out, if he was goin' to dry up the mortgages on his pa's ol' place an' git a spread o' his own. You didn't want to see that, Judge. So you was out to knock Jimmy off the payroll hereabouts an' then to freeze him off his place."

The lawman clenched his fists and opened his mouth to protest, but the Association man relentlessly drove on. "When Jimmy was down an' out, an' losin' his place for taxes, you told him in public he could marry yore 'dopted gal, quick as he could show yu' a thousan' dollars cash money to set 'er up with. Then yu' passed the word around yu' had a thousan' dollar's cash comin' in on the Deadwood stage, to buy up land at the next sheriff's sale—to buy Jimmy's own range, Judge.

"You knew what Jimmy would do. Yu' knew what any man would do, in them circumstances. So yu' pack yore coach with hard-case hired gunners from Deadwood, an' when Jimmy tries a stick-up—single-handed, an' with a unloaded

gun—yu' git him blasted full o' lead b'fore he knew what was happenin'.

"Yo're forgittin' maybe that Jimmy had no place but Cal Peoples' Hole-in-the-Wall camp to ride to, when he thought he was dyin'. Naturally, when Cal put 'im back on his feet, he stayed with the gang to even up a few scores. You got an obligin' memory, Judge. But you ought to be smart enough to see that yu' split yore pool wider'n a cowboy's straddle when yu' started to usin' it as a tool to settle yore personal grudges.

"Result, that gang, with Jimmy along, is bleedin' yore range o' fat beef, an' you ain't got enough unity in yore pool to raise a posse t' ride behind the Red Wall an' run that gang out. Yo're cuttin' off yore nose to spite yore face, Judge. An' there's talk now o' freezin' you out o' the pool!"

The judge choked with anger. "It's lies, John Irons! All lies! I've give Jimmy every chance in the world. Why I've give him—"

"I know how big hearted you are, Judge," the Association man broke in, dryly. "You'd give Jimmy everything the hen laid, except the aig. An' you'd begrudge him what he got. You've hounded him to where he is, an' now yo're crowdin' him on from there. An' you've used yore offices t' do it. You oughta be rode outa town on a pole. An' maybeso you will be!"

The judge was apoplectic. John Irons thought for a moment he was going to grab foi the gun in the worn old holster on his hip But just then the door behind the Association man burst open, and the judge's attention was distracted.

Suspicious of doors that opened behind him, Sudden John swung around. But, completing the turn, he stood awkward and nonplussed, looking into a pair of the bluest eyes he'd ever seen. The eyes were framed by yellow curling hair, and they were angry and excited. They flickered in surprise when they saw John Irons. Then they swept past him, as if he hadn't existed at all, and settled upon the judge.

"Dad!" the girl cried. And that single word was at once an accusation, a denunciation, and a plea. She moved toward the judge, and her heels clicked angrily on the bare floor of the little whitewashed cube the judge called his office.

★

JOHN IRONS had acquired, in his time, a deep-seated respect for angry women, and it was his aim to give this one wagon room. He was backing away and preparing to take an inconspicuous leave, when an action of the girl arrested him. She drew a large square piece of cardboard from her purse and hurled it with a denouncing gesture to the desk in front of the judge.

John Irons was forced to admit then—all his convictions notwithstanding—that some women could look mighty pretty when roiled. Especially, he thought, ones with blue eyes and yellow hair, and a pert little nose that went white and showed up the freckles.

"Did you do this, Dad?"

The girl's tone implied that it was no small crime she inquired into, and John Irons knew how incredibly ornery the judge could be on occasion. Yielding to a natural impulse, he checked his retreat and craned his neck without a blush to inspect this evidence of the lawman's most recent malevolence.

John Irons received a shock.

It was a fresh-printed reward dodger the girl had thrown upon the desk. John Irons could see the face upon it, and it was his first impression that it was old Jim Kane himself—young Jimmy's cowman dad—who grinned at him from the poster's square frame. Then his reason righted him. That was the way Jim Kane

had looked twenty years before. He wouldn't still look the same. Anyhow, Jim Kane was dead.

The face on the dodger, then, would be young Jimmy. And it said, in large letters at the top: "$1,000 reward will be paid personally by T. Joe Cabanne for the apprehension of the above stage robber and cattle thief. Dead or alive!"

John Irons puckered his eyes, and looked at the judge. The lawman was looking at his daughter, and his rage had disappeared. He looked, indeed, like a sheriff's officer John Irons had caught once stealing cows. He coughed and looked at his feet.

"Jimmy's an outlaw, Molly," he said in weak defense, "an' a fugitive from justice. I'm only doin' my duty as I see it."

"It isn't your duty," the girl said frigidly, "to offer your own money in dead or alive rewards for petty crimes like Jimmy's. Why, Dad, to collect that thousand dollars those renegades whom Jimmy rides with would cut his throat and drag his body down here!"

The judge nodded absently. "Yeah. That's the idee. . . ." Then he thought what he was saying, and started. "I mean, they shorely wouldn't do no such thing, with him a-claimin' them as friends."

"That's just what Jimmy will think. And they'll take him unawares!"

The girl was crying silently, and John Irons watched her with open interest. If young Jimmy Kane had been bothering her, as the judge said, at least he'd been making her like it!

The judge's voice startled him. "You can git outa my office now, John Irons. This affair don't concern you."

Sudden John was inclined to agree. He was turning toward the door when the girl caught his arm. Her fingertips dug into his arm, and her tear-reddened eyes held his. "John Irons?" she repeated, in a small, choked voice. "Are *you* John Irons?"

Sudden John swallowed. "Guilty, miss," he admitted. He glanced sidelong at the door, and regretted lingering so long.

The grip on his arm tightened. "Thank heaven!" the girl said, adding to the range detective's mounting consternation. "Jimmy said you were the one man in all the world who could help him. But he didn't know you were coming. Oh, I'm so glad—"

John Irons coughed, embarrassed, disturbed, and a little defiant. He aimed to help Jimmy Kane if he could find a way to do so. But he didn't aim to be stampeded by any female woman. "N-now, hold yore hosses, miss. I just been told on good authority my services ain't required in this fuss."

"But you *are* needed!" Her fingers dug into his flesh, to impress the fact upon him. "Jimmy says you were his father's best friend. He thinks you're the only man on earth, now that his father's gone. He said if you would only come up, you could iron things out in no time. And if what he says about you is right, you will help him—without waiting to be invited again."

Women, John Irons reflected dourly, had a fine way of mixing things up, so that a man couldn't think straight. It occurred to him that this particular girl was largely responsible for the tight into which Jimmy Kane had got himself—just as another had been responsible for the shooting of the elder Jim Kane, and the starting of this feud in the first place. It all went to confirm an opinion he held concerning the whole entire female sex. And it buttressed his resistance to this girl before him.

"Looky, miss. . . ." He fumbled for the correct words to put her in her place, without being rough. Then he made a bad mistake. He looked at her.

Her eyes were dry now, but still red from crying. The look in them was des-

perate and pleading—and sort of hopefully confident and adoring. John Irons' defenses fell without another shot.

"Reckon the girl's right," he told her father, feeling a little taller, somehow, in her eyes. "Reckon there is nothin' to hold me from collectin' that reward money, while I'm doin' nothin' else. I'll trouble yu' for a warrant, Judge. An' I'll bring him in."

The girl's face fell, and uncertainty invaded her eyes.

The judge said nothing for a moment. Sullen objection and refusal was stamped in his contrary face. But John Irons was a duly authorized officer of the law, and he couldn't resist.

John Irons pocketed the warrant and the dodger, and turned toward the door. He saw the uncertainty and dismay in the girl's eyes, and knew that she had taken his words seriously. He signaled her with his eyes, to follow him outside.

"It looks," he told her outside the office, "like Jimmy's done throwed an' tied hisself in record time. But there is one chance we can git him outa this jam he's in. 'We' means you an' me, miss. Can I count on yu' to side me?"

The girl looked at him searchingly. At length she nodded, and her eyes trusted him again. "I swear it," she whispered.

"Then be at Missus Hoyle's roomin' house t'night," John Irons told her. "All night, maybe, till I come. If you could be in my room, when I git back with Jimmy, without startin' a neighborhood scandal, there's a slim chance we might make thishere idee o' mine work."

CHAPTER TWO

Behind the Red Wall

THE afternoon was waning when John Irons approached the Red Wall, the high, jutting red rock fault that arose bleak and unscalable to make inaccessible the Hole-in-the-Wall country behind it. The Hole itself—a deep-cleft gorge worn through the towering perpendicular wall by the Middle Fork of the Powder—was before him. That narrow passage, known also as the Red Canyon, was the only gateway through the Red Wall in all its thirty-mile length; and half a dozen riflemen entrenched in the narrow cut could stand off an entire army indefinitely. It was as safe as being in God's pocket.

John Irons saw sunlight glint on rifle steel high up on the canyon's rock-ribbed scarp. He knew that since he'd forded the Middle Fork, ten miles back, he'd been under the eyes and guns of the Hole guards. The knowledge didn't trouble him greatly. He'd been in the Hole many times before. He remembered well the terms of admission that were laid down as law by the men who holed up there.

Ride in openly, alone. Stop when ordered to stop. Conceal nothing about your mission, if you expect to ride out again. Hang onto your guns—if you're man enough to try it.

These requirements he aimed to observe, and he had no fear about getting in. Getting out might be different. But he'd worry about that when the time came. Meanwhile, he felt a strange calm and a lonesome, almost melancholy nostalgia creep over him. He was recalling, from out the lonely corridors of memory, the first time he'd ridden through that narrow, dangerous gap ahead. It was pleasant remembering. . . .

* * *

It had been a good while ago—back before the open range had followed the buffalo and the wild Indians into colorful legend. The James Boys had just left the Hole then, and the Wild Bunch hadn't been heard of, and the country behind the Red Wall was a valued and peaceful part

of the vast 76 cow range. John Irons had had his first job, jingling for the biggest cow brand in Wyoming. Jim Kane, the best bronc-rider in Wyoming, was handling the rough string and showing young Irons all he knew to this day about horses.

They'd been the same age, John Irons and Jim Kane, and they'd hitched like a pair of well-trained cut-out ponies at round-up time. John Irons, the rough-rider, taking the raw range colts and knocking the edges off them for Jim Kane. Riding each squealing, sunfishing baby three or four saddles, dragging the buck and the cussedness out of them.

Jim Kane going on from there, turning out saddlers, packers, long horses—whatever was needed. Cut-out horses that could cut the baking-powder out of a biscuit and never break the crust!

Pardners. Whether it was bringing in the day's riding string before breakfast, by starlight, with frost on their soft beards, or cutting a rusty in town of a Saturday night, the two of them had been like one.

Then the change. So gradual at first neither of them knew it was happening. Jim meeting the little schoolmarm at Bessemer Bend, spending sit-up time with her at nights, laying off the booze in town. John Irons seeing Jim was getting his foot in it, slicking back his hair and trying to cut Jim out—to save 'im. Getting pitched inside the chute. Finding no man but Jim Kane stood any chance at Bessemer Bend.

Things changing faster—faster than any of them knew. Big Red Cabanne—Judge T. Joe's first-born whelp—riding up from the Crazy Woman bottoms to ramrod the 76 brand's Powder River spread. Big Red spotting that little schoolmarm and snubbing his cut-out horse right away. The gal pretendin' she was caught, just to make Jim Kane set up and take notice. The big shindig in the Goose Egg bunkhouse of a Thanksgiving night.

Red Cabanne sending Jim Kane out to dig post holes where a fence would only have been in the way, while Red rode down to Bessemer Bend to line the schoolmarm up for the dance. Jim Kane mad as a fresh-branded bronc when he found out, but hobbled and tied on account of needing his job so bad, if he aimed to marry. The rest of the gang, unbeknown to Jim, plotting ways to roach the boss and sideline him. . . .

John Irons still had a picture of the way big Red Cabanne looked, strutting out of the foreman's house the morning of the Goose Egg dance, dolled up to nine-hundred in his checkered drummers' suit and bald-faced shirt. Climbing like a duke onto his tall blue Sunday horse. . . . And never knowing a wire-bristled curry brush had been slid under his saddle blanket, bristles down.

The big blue exploding under him as his weight hit the saddle. Big Red turning end-over-appetite through the air, and getting tromped when he hit the ground. Big Red nursing a broken nose and ribs and dislocated jaw, and seeing Jim Kane ride south after all, to hoe it down with the schoolmarm at the Goose Egg.

That conspiring 76 range crew thought that the Goose Egg dance would be the end of it—but they found they had reckoned without the cross-grained, spoiled-bronc cussedness of the Cabanne tribe. They saw the red-haired ornery-eyed ramrod ride Jim Kane week in and week out, until they all knew it couldn't go on. John Irons himself tried to put Red Cabanne straight on the curry brush business, but Red only bowed his neck and refused to listen. Big Red poured it on Jim Kane all the harder, and Jim turned on him at last.

Jim Kane beat the foreman so out of shape his own horse didn't know him. Big Red ran for the bunkhouse, bellowing like a locoed bull, and came out with his double-action equalizer, shooting badly.

Jim Kane stood in the middle of the yard with his hands out in front of him, and yelled at the mad-crazy ramrod to quit, but Big Red cut down all the closer with his whining slugs.

Jim Kane borrowed a gun, and shot Red Cabanne straight through his bone-rinded skull.

The rest of it wasn't so vivid, so straight in John Irons' mind. He'd quit the 76 after the shooting, and he saw Jim Kane only occasionally after that. But he knew the story well enough.

Jim lost his job over the killing, but not his girl. The schoolmarm waited for Jim in the courtroom at Buffalo during the murder trial. She kissed Jim in front of the whole court when he was acquitted. Jim took her hand and led her up to the witness stand, and the judge tied the marryin' knot then and there, with the jurymen serving as witnesses. The sheriff was best man. That's what the law thought of Jim Kane—then.

John Irons knew the rest of that tragic story, too. . . .

The resulting bad blood between the Kanes and the Cabannes. The old judge who'd sired Red bucking Jim at every turn, while Jim was trying to get a ranch together for him and the schoolmarm—and little Jimmy—to live on. Jim locking horns with Jase Cabanne, the judge's second son, over a water hole. Hard words and threats, and boasts. Jase Cabanne's ultimatum, delivered to Jim Kane by old Ed Brady, one-armed stable swamper, for half a dollar—while Jim and Sudden John were drinking for old times' sake in the Blue Bottle Bar.

John Irons would always be able to see that scared, dried-up derelict of a man standing like a ghost between the saloon's swing doors, speaking his piece like a robot in his high, squeaking voice, then ducking quickly out of sight:

"Jase Cabanne says tell Jim Kane he's heard Jim is wantin' to see him on important bizness, an' if he does he better come out now, on account of he don't want to be disappointed about seein' him anymore."

"I Talked with God"

(Yes, I Did — Actually and Literally)

and as a result of that little talk with God a strange Power came into my life. After 42 years of horrible, dismal, sickening failure, everything took on a brighter hue. It's fascinating to talk with God, and it can be done very easily once you learn the secret. And when you do—well—there will come into your life the same dynamic Power which came into mine. The shackles of defeat which bound me for years went a-shimmering—and—now—? —well, I own control of the largest daily newspaper in our County, I own the largest office building in our City, I drive a beautiful Cadillac limousine. I own my home which has a lovely pipe-organ in it, and my family are abundantly provided for after I'm gone. And all this has been made possible because one day, ten years ago, I actually and literally talked with God.

You, too, may experience that strange mystical Power which comes from talking with God, and when you do, if there is poverty, unrest, unhappiness, or ill-health in your life, well—this same God-Power is able to do for you what it did for me. No matter how useless or helpless your life seems to be—all this can be changed. For this is not a human Power I'm talking about—it's a God-Power. And there can be no limitations to the God-Power, can there? Of course not. You probably would like to know how you, too, may talk with God, so that this same Power which brought me these good things might come into your life, too. Well—just write a letter or a post-card to Dr. Frank B. Robinson, Dept. 33, Moscow, Idaho, and full particulars of this strange Teaching will be sent to you free of charge. But write now—while you are in the mood. It only costs one cent to find out, and this might easily be the most profitable one cent you have ever spent. It may sound unbelievable—but it's true, or I wouldn't tell you it was.—Advt. Copyright, 1940, Frank B. Robinson.

Jim Kane stepped to the sidewalk, over John Irons' protest, and was killed by Jase Cabanne—in a fair stand-and-draw fight that left John Irons no cards to pick up for Jim. Jim's little schoolmarm wife was dead of grief inside of a year, and young Jimmy dogied, to raise himself however he could on the range. Young Jimmy made a regular hand at fifteen, thanks to John Irons' tutelage, and a top-hand at twenty. He heeded John Irons' plea not to carry on the shooting feud, but he had the gall to make calf's eyes at the judge's little yellow-haired adopted daughter.

Jase Cabanne spoke his mind on that particular subject, likely at the judge's nudging. Jimmy followed the family pattern by knocking Jase's teeth down his throat. Jase went for his gun, and Jimmy beat him to the draw. Thus Jimmy Kane killed the man who shot his father, and ripped the old wound wide open, to bleed freely once more.

The girl complicated things by standing by Jimmy. The law refused to touch Jimmy for the killing, and T. Joe went after him in as many ways as he could, both as judge and as head of the cowman's pool. The judge drove Jimmy onto the Long Trail, spending his own hard-earned cash to get Jimmy killed, in retaliation.

And all of it on account of a rusty, no-good wire-bristled horse brush slid under a cocky ramrod's saddle blanket, twenty years before.

"This here is one job you better make good on, John," the Association man told himself soberly, hardly noticing that he'd entered the Hole-in-the-Wall. "You got to straighten this mess out, somehow, an' git Jimmy back an' onto his feet. 'F I remember right, I was *you* that slid that brush under Red Cabanne's saddle blanket."

There was a grim look in John Iron's eyes as he rode ahead.

A RIFLE cracked high above him, ending his rumination, placing a timely period at the end of the thought.

The old stop-sign hadn't changed any, he reflected, coming quickly back to the present. The bullet had snipped off a sage stem directly in front of him. And Wagon, his big dun gelding, had halted in his tracks. Wagon savvied gun-talk about as well as the man on his long back.

Three more times the rifle cracked. The slugs worried the sage clump the first one had cut off, raised little dust puffs in the narrow trail. The almost perpendicular rock walls picked up the reports and tossed the echoes back and forth, filling the chasm with a confused, chaotic roar.

John Irons looked up and saw three small puff balls of smoke lifting from behind a jutting ledge, a third of the way up the wall. He could see the gun barrel, resting in a saddle of the rock.

Everything still the same, he mused. The two-bit small-fry that now inhabited the Hole mimicked the ways of the Wild Bunch, even if they had never been admitted to that select outlaw crew. Even though they'd never merited—and never would have merited—the attention of Butch Cassidy, the smiling Mormon-Irish cowboy who'd risen to be King of the Out Trails.

With purposeful deliberation, John Irons reached to his pocket and brought out makings. With his eyes on the rocks above him, he fashioned his cigarette, sealed the roll with a lick from his tongue, and placed it with fastidious care between his lips.

The gun racketing had died now, and acoustics in the Hole deceived the unwary. "Lookit the ornery cuss," an awed voice whispered up on the wall. "Sets there like he owned the place."

"Ask 'im what he's up to," a matter-of-fact voice whispered in reply. "Then we'll either drop 'im where he sets, or

turn 'im back the way he deserves.

The first voice obliged. "Where yu' bound, hombre, an' what yu' aim t' do when yu' git there—*if* an' *when?*"

John Irons lighted his smoke leisurely, flipped his match carelessly at the rocks. Such cheap bravura would never impress the Wild Bunch. But it wasn't the old Bunch in the Hole now.

"I'm lookin' for Cal Peoples, an' I'm bound for wherever he's at," he called back.

Silence greeted his words. Then boots scuffed rock above him, as the guards came down to investigate. Soon a lean, watery-eyed youngster and an older, frailer man with one eye emerged from the rocks. The latter carried a rifle, and John Irons, recalling the warning shots, felt a big respect for the oldster's single orb.

The youngster was still the spokesman. "What's yer name—er the one yu' go by?"

"John Irons. An' I reckon it's good as any to go by."

His interrogator started, looked at him narrowly, as if to see if he joked. Then the watery eyes narrowed, and one hand settled to the butt of his gun. He stepped back so he could see the old man without taking his eyes off the rider.

"Whut yu' think?"

The old man shrugged. "Says he's lookin' fer Cal. Take 'im up." He cut his one eye wickedly at John Irons. "If he's who says he is, Cal will be pleased, right smart, to see 'im."

The youngster advanced uncertainly. "Shuck yer guns, John Irons. Jus' drap 'em in the road, an' back away. It pesters Cal t' see strangers wearin' iron."

John Irons shook his head. "Nu-uh. I ain't no stranger to Cal. Fact is, I'd look funny to Cal, without these ol' can-openers o' mine. An' I'd feel a sight funnier'n I'd look."

The youngster's eyes consulted the oldster's.

The old man shrugged. "Mus' be John Irons. Set in his idears, anyhow. Git yer hoss, an' keep 'um in front of yu'. If he tries somethin', shoot fust. Cal would as soon see 'im daid, anyhow."

Once through the Hole-in-the-Wall and out onto the flat rolling grass plains behind the Red Wall, a haunting nostalgia of long-gone adventures returned to plague John Irons.

The old trails were still there—the Outlaw Trail, made immortal by the Wild Bunch. A mite grass-grown and dim now, yet plainly visible to a man who knew where to look. It angled away from the Red Canyon in two directions—north down the Nowood, skirting the Big Horns and the Crow Agency, to Landusky and the Little Rockies and Canada. South and west across the painted badlands to Green River and Brown's Hole, Robber's Roost, and as many other way-stations as the ingenuity and the personality of the rider could arrange. And, finally, the Old Mexico and the Rio. . . . There were a hundred-odd other back-door side trails, to Casper, Thermop' and Lander, Jackson's Hole and Star Valley. Thence into Idaho or Utah, as a man's fancy might lead. But only one front door: The Red Canyon—The Hole-in-the-Wall.

There was fresh cow sign back in the Hole itself. But the tracks petered out on the grass behind the wall, and there was no stock in sight. The gang, John Irons deduced, must hustle the stolen beef right on through, probably south to the U. P. at Green River. It was of little import. If his scheme succeeded that night, there would be no more gang operating behind the Red Wall. If it failed, he wouldn't have to worry about cow thieves any more unless—as some contended—dead cow thieves plagued the devil down in Hell. . . .

It was quite dark when, at his guard's command, John Irons reined up before the squalid little Hole-in-the-Wall cabin

in a lone aspen stand well behind the Red Wall. It was a log, dirt-roof affair, well hidden in the trees.

Frank and Jesse James had built it during their rendezvous in the Indian country, when the Sioux had had the run of the Hole-in-the-Wall. The 76 had used it as a line cabin, when its range ran here, and Butch Cassidy had later made it his Wyoming headquarters, after the Wild Bunch had made the Red Wall country unhealthy for fat beef.

A kerosene lantern burned on a rickety table in the center of one of its two rooms. A poker game was in progress there, in plain view from the paneless, unblinded window. Cal Peoples felt over-safe, it struck John Irons, behind his red-rock barrier.

"Got a long-nosed gent as craves t' see yu', Cal," the watery-eyed guard sang out. "Says his name is Irons—*John Irons!*"

There followed a deep and hollow silence in the cabin. Then, one by one, the players cashed in and left the table. The lamp still burned on the table. But no man was visible. The voice that replied belatedly was one that John Irons would have recognized anywhere.

"Tell 'im he better be lyin' about his name—for his own good. But send 'im in!"

CHAPTER THREE

Baited Gun-Trap

FOR a moment after stepping inside the smoke-filled cabin, John Irons almost regretted the wild impulse that had brought him there. A neater-laid trap he had never stepped into. There was no gun drawn on him. But there were a dozen men in the room, not counting the rheumy-eyed youngster behind him. They were deployed in such a manner that none of them would be caught in another's cross-fire. Every one was heavily armed, and a sorrier, uglier collection John Irons hoped never to face.

They were the tinhorn toughs and the small-fry—the cut-backs and hangers-on who'd always helped to make up the loosely-federated Hole-in-the-Wall gang, but who had never been admitted to the elite Wild Bunch. Butch, always a rare judge of men, had rejected the scrubs and the race-horse muleys from his inner circlee. They'd followed the Wild Bunch like the coyotes follow the cougars, taking the left-overs and glad of them. And now that the Wild Bunch was disbanded and gone off to South America, or to Cuba to fight in Uncle Sam's war there, the cut-backs tried to ape the big boys—Longabaugh, Kid Curry, Harve Logan, Butch himself.

But there wasn't a man among the lot of them. Shake a newspaper behind them, and they'd all stampede. And they were the more dangerous for it. A man had been as safe sitting down with the real Wild Bunch as with his wife in the kitchen of his home—so long as he kept his cards face-up. But any minute one of these self-styled longriders might lose his nerve and blast John Irons to a bloody death.

John Irons ignored them for the moment, and looked about the room. Chaps, slickers, rifles, and saddles hung around on the walls. The willow floor the Wild Bunch had installed was burned now for firewood; the canvas window blinds gone for chinking. The stone hearth was littered with brown cigarette stubs, wood ashes, and the accumulated cooking grease of many years. The Wild Bunch had kept the cabin looking like a white man's den. Now it was more like a crumby Indian's hogan.

"Wal," a cold nasal voice intruded, "this here is some honor. I ain't seen you John sence you shot at me in Lander—an' missed."

John Irons turned and faced Cal Peo-

ples, the scrawny, long-haired outlaw boss, and looked deep into the slanted lifeless pits of his eyes.

Cal Peoples was a possible exception to Sudden John's evaluation of the gang. For sadistic, cold-blooded cruelty, Cal was the equal of Harve Logan, the only natural killer ever to ride with the Butch's band as a regular. Cal Peoples had the nerve—but not the canny good sense it took to get into the big money on the Long Trail. Cal was small-fry, like the others—a cut-back that would measure up to those he aped only in the final pay-off. For Cal Peoples would die hard as any.

"I been wantin' to 'pologize for that shot," John Irons eased. "I had mud in my gun, Cal."

The outlaw stood on wide-spread feet, his thumbs hooked into his sagging gun belt, pistol grips curving casually at hand. His eyes narrowed at the stock inspector's words. His knuckles went white.

"You ride here jus' to square up that shot?"

John Irons wagged his head. "Nu-uh. I come to serve a warrant on one of yore boys."

The outlaw chuckled. "One thing I like about you, John. You allus give a man a good laugh. You bring yore prayer book, too? Yu'll need one, John."

John Irons grinned bleakly. "You never seen the day you could kill me, Cal. An' yu' won't be tryin' it today. Not when we both stand to pick up a little cash money. Cast yore sun-burned eyes on that!"

He dropped the reward dodger on the table. He heard the outlaw leader grunt as he looked it over. But he himself was looking at Jimmy Kane.

Jimmy hadn't changed much, he noted. The same tall-shouldered, slim younker, still a dead ringer for his dad. Good-looking, half-wild, reckless—a hot blooded colt made bad by mistreatment.

Jimmy still looked thunderstruck, seeing John Irons there. But his eyes were sullen and suspicious too.

Cal Peoples looked up from the dodger. "What's the deal?"

"Fifty-fifty suits me," John Irons told him. "You turn him over to me. I take him in an' collect. I split with yu'. Five hundred iron men for each of us."

Jimmy Kane had seen the picture on the poster. He leaped forward, snarling. His hand was on his gun. But Cal Peoples was quicker. The outlaw's gun came out. It snaked viciously through the air, and struck the cowboy's head just above the ear. Jimmy Kane sank threshing to the floor.

"Take his gun," Peoples snapped from the corner of his mouth, and an underling jumped to obey. The outlaw faced John Irons again, and holstered his gun. Greed, deceit, and craft were mirrored in his slitted eyes.

"It sounds like a fair deal, John. But I'd have to talk it over with my boys. You wait here, an' keep a eye on the prisoner. You boys come with me."

★

WHEN the door had clicked shut behind the outlaws, Jimmy Kane came uncertainly to his feet. His eyes were glazed, from the gun blow, and the harder blow of his friend's apparent treachery.

"What's got into you, John, ridin' me inta the fence this-a-way?"

John Irons grinned bleakly, seeking how things must look to Jimmy just then. "Wrong, first time, Jimmy. I'm only hazin' away from the wire. I knew Cal would cut yore throat, the minute he found yore scalp was worth that much money. I had to git yu' to chuck the outfit, an' I showed that dodger to Cal so'd you'd see how quick he'd sell yu' out. Otherwise, you wouldn't of listened to reason. You'd of felt yu' had to stay on with Cal, come hell or high water, because he give yu'

a lift when you was badly needin' it."

Understanding lighted the youth's water-blue eyes. "You're right on one thing, John. Gettin' in with a gang like this is like gettin' hold of a bull by the tail. 'T'ain't easy to hang on, but yu' can't let go. As for Cal, you've convinced me 'bout him. But you've queered me, shore. You think Cal would let me go, now? You think he's ever figure on divvyin' up the reward on me?"

John Irons wagged his head. "I figger Cal is tellin' his boys outside right now how they're goin' to shoot the pair of us down, in here, an' then whoever takes you in 'll tell a cock-an'-bull yarn about us killin' each other off while I was tryin' to serve my papers. But they ain't done it, yet, Jimmy. An' maybe they won't.

"Now listen. You take this left-handed gun o' mine. I'll keep the other. Cal don't know I'm onto his game. I'll walk out there like I'd forgot to tell 'im somethin'. When I git close to him, I'll start a fuss. That'll be yore cue. My hoss an' that water-eyed kid's is off to the right o' the cabin in the trees. I'll keep the boys interested while you git the hosses. Then you can cover me while I join yu'—if I'm lucky."

The cords along Jimmy Kane's neck stood out as he accepted the proffered gun in absence of his own. John Irons shot him a tight grin, and stepped outside. He saw the outlaws, gathered in a little knot around their leader, twenty or thirty yards away. Already they were starting to split up, to surround the cabin, and their guns were drawn. John Irons played dumb.

"Hey Cal," he called, striding toward them, "there's one thing I forgot t' hand yu'—It's important, too."

"What's it?" the outlaw demanded.

"This!" The Association man stumbled sideways into the longrider. His toes dug deep into the earth, and his legs drove suddenly ahead. The point of his shoulder sank deep into the outlaw's exposed stomach.

Cal Peoples grunted as he jackknifed, and John Irons hurled him against the legs of his nearest henchman. The two of them went down.

John Irons also hit the ground. But he was up instantly, attacking the others blindly with his clubbed pistol, yelling like a banshee. These others, surprised and flat-footed, held their fire for fear of hitting each other. But Cal Peoples had his breath again, and was yelling orders.

The outlaws massed around the Association man with their guns clubbed. A gaunt, lantern-jawed man grabbed at him, and Sudden John struck him down. He broke another's arm, and started shooting.

Jimmy Kane had reached the horses, and he was shooting also. The scrubs and cut-backs, caught in the cross-fire, broke from in front of John Irons, and he ran to join the youngster with the horses as the outlaws began to return the fire.

A slug took John Irons in the leg, and he went down. Jimmy Kane reached him in a bound, helped him into his saddle. And not too soon. Peoples had collected his scattered crew. They were charging the aspen grove—shooting. John Irons lay flat along his gelding, and used the spurs.

"Headin' out, Jimmy!"

"Not this time!" a voice snarled.

Too late, John Irons saw a dark scrawny form leap from a tree, almost duly in front of him. The man fired as it yelled, and the slug stung John Irons' face as it went by. The flash of the gun had lighted up momentarily the evil features of Cal Peoples, as he made his final, desperate play.

John Irons' pistol was still in his hand, the hammer at half cock. Cal Peoples was fanning his leveled gun for a follow-up shot, and John Irons had one more cartridge left in his Colt.

Waiting until his running gelding's forefeet struck the ground, he snapped a quick shot—and a prayer.

The slug—or the prayer—went true. The outlaw's head rolled back on his shoulders, and Sudden John saw an ugly hole squarely between his slanted eyes, as the gelding thundered past, smashing through the brush.

The outlaw boss was down and still, but the shooting picked up, and snarling slugs bit close. John Irons saw Jimmy Kane's horse bobbing in the dark ahead of him beyond the aspen grove. He lay flat over the gelding's neck once more, and let him out. . . .

CHAPTER FOUR

Death at the Hole-in-the-Wall

THE long-geared dun soon overhauled Kane's borrowed broomtail, and side by side the two pounded over the dark earth. Sounds of pursuit came from behind as the stock thieves found their horses. They were leaderless now, and less effective than before. But this was their style of fighting. It was dark, and they outnumbered their enemies, and the enemies were on the run. It was their dish, and they still could make it hot for the fleeing men. And there still was the dead-eyed rifle guard in the Hole ahead.

While the pursuit was gaining, John Irons thought more and more of the man in the rocks at the Hole-in-the-Wall. When he could see the rough outline of the gap ahead, against the lighter dark of the sky, he swung his horse over nearer Jimmy Kane's.

"There's a one-eyed ol' rannyhan with a rifle up the Hole," he told the younger man. "An' he's mighty steady with his sights. He'll have heard the shootin'. He'll be waitin' for us."

Jimmy Kane slumped a little in his leather. The fight seemed to go out of him. "That's old Gunner McQuidd. He can shoot the eyes out of a rabbit at half a mile. First one an' then the other. We can't get past him, John. Nobody ever has. An' if we cut back along the wall now, we'll run smack into them bully boys behind us. Looks like a short day, after all."

"You swing over here close," John Irons said in reply. "Grab my laig, an' jump up b'hind me. We'll drive yore broomtail ahead of us. In the dark, that rifle sharp won't see there's nobody on her. When he shoots at her, it'll give us his position. Then if the two of us can't bring him down, with him not expectin' to be shot at, why we better both sell out!"

"Them bully boys are poundin' close b'hind us, John," the younger man cautioned. "With us both on one horse, they'll ride us down."

John Irons grunted. "This gelding can carry two easier'n most carry one. Anyhow, I been holding him in for that cayuse, yore on, the last five miles. Swing over now. An' jump!"

Jimmy Kane jumped, and John Irons quirted the broomtail mare sharply across the rump. She leaped ahead of them, toward the gap. The gelding followed at a slower pace, and John Irons pulled his saddle gun from its boot. The outlaw mare was inside the gorge, running, and sparks flew from her iron shoes, plainly marking her position and course. John Irons eased the gelding down, to prevent its own shoes from throwing sparks. He waited, rifle poised.

The Winchester cracked suddenly from the wall overhead, and a long silver of blue-orange flame lanced the darkness. John Irons heard the mare keel and go down. But his eyes had frozen to that flash of powder flame, and he was firing as fast as he could pump bullets from his magazine, raking the area around the telltale flash with withering, deadly fire. They

were well within pistol range, and Jimmy was firing, too.

John Irons never did see the hidden rifleman. But he heard that thin, eery scream as he fell from his high perch. Then they were pounding ahead again, past the kicking broomtail, into the dark Hole-in-the-Wall.

No pursuit followed them beyond the Red Wall, and John Irons soon eased the laboring gelding to a long swinging walk. The miles went by in silence. John Irons was busy with his thoughts, and he left the youth to his own.

He was relieved to be outside of the Hole alive. But his job was only half done. He knew he had broken the Hole-in-the-Wall gang for all time. Leaderless now, the gang would disintegrate. The tinhorn badmen and the cut-backs would soon leave the Hole, or fall into the hands of the law. The rustling would stop. But John Irons' debt to old Jim Kane, and to young Jimmy and the Cabannes, was as yet unpaid.

John Irons had got Jimmy away from the rustler gang. He'd kept Peoples from killing the kid for the reward. But there would be others who'd gun him down as quick as Peoples would have done, so long as the reward was allowed to stand. And Jimmy would always ride the lonesome long trail so long as T. Joe's trumped-up charges were valid. He'd have to take care of Judge T. Joe and those charges, but without more bloodshed. And there was only one way he could ever hope to do that.

He wondered vaguely if the girl would be waiting for him, as she'd promised. He didn't know why, but he was pretty certain she would be.

And then Jimmy Kane's insistent voice intruded on his thoughts. Jimmy was demanding that he stop the horse and let him down.

"I'll hoof it to a ranch I know of, not far from here," the kid was saying. "I'll get a horse, an' head south. I shore do thank yu' for what you've done, John Irons. But I reckon this here is close enough to Kaycee as is safe for me."

John Irons' mind was racing. Then, suddenly, he'd gone very limp in his saddle. He was moaning softly. Jimmy Kane peered at him in surprise and anxiety.

"What's the matter, John?" His voice was worried.

"It's my laig," the Association man gritted. "I stopped a slug back at the cabin. Guess I've been losin' a heap o' blood. I—I—Hell, Jimmy, I cain't even set up any longer."

The younger man swore in sympathy and general consternation. "Hell, John, why'n't you tell me b'fore? I'd plumb forgot about you stoppin' that slug. Lissen, John: There's a ranch not far north from here up on the North Fork. Friend o' mine runs it. If you can make it that far, we can phone a doc. An' I can get a horse!"

John Irons groaned. "This is a hell of a note, Jimmy. I wouldn't ask yu' to ride inta Kaycee with me—even if it is the middle o' the night an' chances good nobody'd see yu'. But that slug took me in an old shotgun wound, an' the medico that fixed the first hole up said ever an' I got hit there again, I'd likely lose the whole laig. I can feel them bone ends a-gratin' in there now, Jimmy. I reckon I better find a saw-bones, directly. You run along, Jimmy. I'll worry through somehow."

"Like hell!" Jimmy Kane snapped. "I'll set right here b'hind yu' the whole way. Like you say, the town'll be asleep now, anyhow. Ain't nobody will see me. Besides, it'll give me a chance to pay a social call on T. Joe. He'll eat every dodger in his house, an' then he'll follow me south, halfway to Casper, on his hands an' knees!"

"You ought to go easy on T. Joe," John Irons advised. "Shore, he's so or-

nery that hair won't grow on his haid, an' as cussed contrary as a wet ketch-rope. But it ain't his fault. Some folks are born measely an' contrary, an' some are not. Ones that is, can't help it. The judge has lost his two boys, an' he's too ornery to see how no 'count they was. He blames you Kanes, an' that's made him more cussed than ever. But hit don't go clean through him, like a mule. He thinks he's doin' right. An' he ain't so bad, an' yu' git next to him."

"I aim to get next to him," the youth vowed bitterly. "Close enough to stomp his guts out!"

John Irons was well-night helpless by the time they reached his boarding house in Kaycee, so that Jimmy Kane had to carry him inside.

Jimmy laid him easy as he could upon his bed, then lighted the lamp that stood beside the white water pitcher and basin on the washstand alongside the bed. The lamp's yellow glow filled the room, and the cowboy exclaimed sharply in surprise.

For there, seated in the old broken-bladed rocker facing him, was Molly Cabanne. She was smiling.

★

JIMMY KANE didn't smile. The shock of seeing the girl there rocked him back on his heels. His eyes flashed over the room, and into them leaped the hunted, savage look John Irons had seen in them back in the Hole-in-the-Wall cabin. Then the girl was in his arms, and the look left him.

"Forgive me, honey, for thinkin' it," the cowboy said, his lips against her hair, "but it jolted me so to see yu' here, I—I thought for a minute it might be a trap."

The cowboy stood with his back to the bed, within easy reach. John Irons repossessed his gun from the cowboy's holster, and spoke gruffly.

"You was right, the first time, Jimmy. Reckon that's just what this is—a trap!"

The cowboy whirled, found himself covered by the gun that had been in his own holster a moment before. Bleak, uncomprehending amazement glazed his eyes, and he couldn't speak. John Irons, however, could. And did.

"Run along now, miss," he told the girl, "an' git yore daddy. I'll keep the prisoner here."

The girl's eyes glazed like the cowboy's own. She raised one hand to her throat, as if she were suffocating in that atmosphere of treachery. "Bu-but—"

"Hustle, miss," John Irons gruffed. "This is no time for foolishment. That hair-brained hombre there thinks he's ridin' back outa town t'night, back inta his old ways. An' if you don't git yore pappy here, quick, he just might do it. Now, I ain't never loved a man, miss. But if I ever should, why I reckon I would rather have him under my thumb—even safe in jail—than hellin' around on the long trail, an' gittin' himself killed in the end."

With the girl the argument was a potent one. She hesitated a moment in indecision. Then, with an appealing look at Jimmy, she opened the door and left the room.

Jimmy Kane still looked as though someone had sand-bagged him. But John Irons could see trouble, onerous and thick, piling up behind the glaze in his eyes, and he acted while acting was good. Arising from the bed, he hobbled to the door, shut it, and placed his back against it. Jimmy Kane's hard glance followed him.

"Why damn you!" His voice was baffled and hurt, rather than angry. "You can walk. You could of rode your horse in alone, without me comin'. If I didn't know you so well. . . . If you *are* after that bounty money. . . ."

"Money's got its uses," John Irons admitted. "An' maybe I have got my eye on

that thousan' bucks. But don't you git yore Dutch up, Jimmy. It's bad enough I got to think for both of us, without havin' to— Stand back there, Jimmy! Yo're right in guessing I wouldn't shoot yu'. But I'd knock yu' silly with this here gun!"

Something in the Association man's eyes convinced the cowboy he wasn't bluffing. He seemed to change his mind about rushing him. He looked about the room like a cornered animal. But there was no other door, and the window was too small for a man to wriggle through.

Turning back on Sudden John, he cursed the Association man desperately. But Sudden John Irons scarcely heard the aspersions the angered cowboy cast against his morals, manners, appearance, and probable parentage.

He was listening to the nearing footsteps in the hall.

When Judge T. Joe Cabanne came into the room, Jimmy Kane was standing in the middle of the room, and John Irons was on the bed, his wounded leg toward the door.

The girl had told the judge about Jimmy, but he still looked surprised to see the cowboy there. And after a moment's heavy silence, he turned and nodded distantly to John Irons.

"Wal, I see you brung him in—alive." And if he had tried to keep his disappointment out of his voice, he failed utterly in the effort. "Come along, young feller. I've had a cell fixed up for you for a year now."

"Don't git yore shirt off, Judge," John Irons said. "There's a matter of a little reward money to git settled."

"Hell, man," the judge swung on him irately, "What you expect? I don't carry that much cash on me t'night. Call around in the mornin'."

John Irons didn't bat an eye. "Nix. It ain't *my* money. *I* didn't bring Jimmy in. He brung *himself*—an' me, too. We had a little argyment with Cal Peoples an' his crowd. I stopped a slug, as yu' can see. Jimmy brung me inta town, holdin' me onto my hoss, an' carried me inta this room. The girl there will witness it. Then he hung around an' waited for you to come—to collect his reward. It belongs to Jimmy, Judge."

The lawman clamped down hard on his unlighted cigar.

"You're mighty cute, ain't you, John Irons?" the judge inquired sweetly, when his voice was under control. "Maybe he'll get the money. But he'll wait a long time for it. This don't affect one whit the charges laid against him in my court. Regardless of *how* I got him, I *have* got him! An' I aim to give him the limit!"

John Irons held a poker face, and played his ace—the one he'd held back, up his sleeve. "Suit yoreself, Joe. I'd heard you coppered all yore bets, but go ahead an' cut off yore nose. When the pool hears how Jimmy knocked out the Hole-in-the-Wall gang an' ended rustlin' on the Powder, they're apt as not to take a hand with the pool boss—which is you. On the other hand, if you treat Jimmy right, I wouldn't be su'prised if he'd let folks think this fight b'tween yu' was put up from the first to git him inta the gang, where he could git at Cal Peoples an' his rustlers. That would make T. Joe Cabanne look like a right smart general—an' a cinch for reappointment to both his jobs!

"But I won't coax yu', Judge. I've learned never to horn in on fambly fights. If yu' want to send yore own son-in-law up for twenty years, an' widder yore own daughter—why, that's no concern o' mine."

"Son-in-law?" The judge choked. "Not while I know it! I'm the girl's legal guardeen, an' she ain't of age—"

"You said in front o' witnesses," John Irons said, and his voice was bland and casual, "that Jimmy could marry yore

daughter quick as he could show yu' a thousan' dollars. Well, he can show yu' just that exact amount, Judge, as quick as you come through with that reward money. . . ." His voice was now no longer bland and casual. "An' I aim to see you *do* come through with it, Judge!"

The lawman stood very quietly in the center of the room. Twice he opened his mouth to speak. Twice he closed it soundlessly.

Finally, he did manage to speak. His tone was a bit thick and more fretful and querulous than usual. But there was an edge of grudging admiration, too; a warmth that hadn't been there before, and it seemed to tally with a faint gleam of friendliness in his bright, ornery old eyes.

"Molly," he told the girl, gruffly, "ye'r shameless. Run home an' fetch that half o' bourbon on the sideboard. I need a drink!"

JOHN IRONS, as it worked out, was hurt worse than he'd thought, and he was confined to his bed a couple of weeks, while the flesh wound in his leg healed over. He wasn't able to attend the wedding. But he heard about it, from the lips of T. Joe Cabanne himself, less than an hour after the judge had given his daughter in marriage—to the everlasting surprise of the Powder River folks—to the son of old Jim Kane. And this surprise was hardly lessened when Jimmy Kane told it around how, as special secret operative from the judge's office, he had eliminated Cal Peoples and busted the Hole-in-the-Wall gang for all time.

T. Joe appeared to have looked on wine while it was red, as indeed, he had.

"Next t' me, John Irons," he expounded, "you're the orneriest, bull-headedest, sun-blindedest critter loose. You thought you'd pulled a fast 'un, slippin' in an' cuttin' the Kane-Cabanne feud off short. But you don't know Molly like I do. She's a Cabanne. She's my own brother's gal, an' she's only been maneuverin' to get Jimmy Kane cornered where she c'n pour it on 'im. An' she's got 'im now.

"I would of ended this here feud if you hadn't butted in. Now you've gone an' prolonged it for as long as them youngsters live. It'll be a real 'un!"

The strange light crept into the judge's eye as he talked, glimmering clearly behind the stubborn, cussed contrariness that would always be there. It looked suspiciously like paternal pride and joy.

"You thought you'd cut a fat one by cleanin' out the Hole-in-the-Wall, too, John Irons. You thought that'd be peaceful cow country from now on. But you guessed wrong again. The Kane-Cabanne feud started back o' the Red Wall. An' there she'll be fit to a finish! I own leases to most o' that grass in there, an' Jimmy's takin' his thousan' dollars in cows an' ranch land, b'hind the Wall.

"They aim to fix up that Hole-in-the-Wall cabin t' live in. An' it's my guess them bullet-scarred walls 'll see hotter times from here on than they've ever seen since the James Boys hewed 'em out!"

John Irons grinned, at the way the old man put it.

It was likely that they would. And he thought it was swell!

THE END

Much of the West's most dramatic, exciting fiction lies along the trails that Cupid blazed. If you have enjoyed this great novel of Molly Cabanne and her man, it's a ten-to-one bet you'll like the salty, fearless, lovable girls who ride through the pages of our companion magazine, RANGELAND ROMANCES! Get a copy today—and look 'em over!

★ ★ DEACON BOTTLE'S

By Robert E. Mahaffay

The lead team hit the river, water boiling and frothing around their legs. . . .

Deacon Bottle, ran the word in Latigo, was off on a three-day drunk, shouting, shooting and helling at Guldager's lawless whiskey camp—to celebrate his signing on with the toughest renegades that ever murdered a stagecoach shotgun guard! . . .

CHAPTER ONE

Help for the Deacon!

THE first report to reach the town of Latigo merely mentioned that Deacon Bottle had spent the afternoon drinking in Al Guldager's whiskey stop located on the Outlaw River road.

Subsequent reports stated that the Deacon had been drunk for three days, had given an exhibition of gun-handling

WHISKEY REBELLION ★

A Novel Featuring One of Western Fiction's Best-Loved Characters

which was going to cost him some money when he sobered down, and was still tearing through Guldager's supply of Old Pepper with a recklessness which foretold trouble.

Latigo shook its head, then swore grimly. The Deacon had been sober too long. The scrupulous legality of his actions had grown boring. This kind of hard-bitten eruption had been overdue, and where it might lead . . . .

Violent discussion of the event eclipsed even the story of the latest hold-up of the Outlaw River stage.

The one man in Latigo who refused to

believe what he heard was Rip Carson. Rip Carson was sixteen plus, and he was everything but a son to Deacon Bottle.

For better than six years he had lived with the Deacon in the hills, and what the Deacon hadn't taught him wasn't worth knowing. He was as tall as the Deacon; lean, wire-hard, quick as a deer.

A drummer in Rig Haynes' Desert Eagle Saloon made the mistake of mentioning the reports, and the rumors, in Rip Carson's presence.

The drummer, afterwards, picked two of his teeth off the floor, rubbed them reasonably clean, and put them in his vest pocket.

After which Rip Carson blew on his skinned knuckles and headed for Guldager's . . . .

★

GULDAGER'S TAVERN, which served also as a stage station, had been built originally as a fort. Guldager has simply thrown up partitions between the log walls and established a bar on the north side of the largest room.

Within a year it had grown as shabby as Guldager himself. The saloonkeeper, a flabby mountain of a man, seldom moved from behind the bar where he overflowed a reinforced stool.

He pulled continually on a drop pipe with a bowl half as big as a coffee cup; the smoke, it was said, made him impervious to the reek of his shirt.

He was impervious, indeed, to anything and everything that took place within range of his pale, blank eyes—even to the sight of Deacon Bottle sprawled at a table in the corner.

The Deacon looked to be in bad shape. A bottle stood before him on the table, and there were other bottles smashed in the corner behind him.

One lapel of his black frock coat had been torn half away; his flowered waistcoat and black tie were a shambles. His eyes were bloodshot, and unshaven beard smudged the lower half of his pinkish, moonlike face. He had been at it for three days, the reports said, and it looked as if the reports were right.

Guldager lumbered off his stool. One of the lamps behind the bar was burned out and smoking. While he refilled it, the Deacon, his hand as steady as a rock, poured whiskey down a crack in the floor.

Guldager, scowling, turned around. "You finished? I'm closin' up for the night."

"Finished!" the Deacon roared. "I ain't halfway begun!"

"If you don't need sleep," growled Guldager. "I do."

With drunken deliberation Deacon Bottle pulled one of his famous silver-mounted sixguns from its holsters, and laid it on the table.

"When it's closin' time," he declared thickly, "I'll do the closin'. Me, I'm still thirsty. Make it Old Pepper."

He got clumsily to his feet, leaning against the table which almost toppled under his blundering weight. He got to the bar, and back to his chair with the bottle.

Half an hour or so went by. The Deacon appeared to have fallen into a doze. He was breathing heavily; his head dropped forward on his chest.

The sound of hoofbeats on the road outside didn't rouse him, nor did the clatter of the door as a man came stamping into the saloon.

The newcomer was a stubby man, bony of jaw and nose, with a weather-beaten hat tugged low against bristling brows. He looked at the sprawled and sodden figure of the Deacon, then at Guldager. The saloonman shrugged.

For a man whose bloodshot and swollen eyes were squeezed shut by stupor, Deacon Bottle took in a good deal. Those bristling brows and bony jaw he had seen

before—on a reward flyer in the office of Sheriff Enoch Starling in Latigo.

Their owner, one Missouri Krane, was faster than most with a sixgun and luckier than most in slipping past the Law.

Deacon Bottle swore softly to himself.

Krane shook his head at the offer of a drink, went on into one of the rear rooms.

After a little while Guldager came heavily from behind the bar and touched Deacon Bottle's shoulder. The Deacon, doing it well, roused himself blearily. He swore with ferocious irritation, and poured himself another drink. The saloonman retreated.

He was up on his reinforced stool again when another man came in from outside. Max Greene, who ran the stages between Outlaw River and Latigo, was as tall, as solid and hard, as an oak brake pole. He wore a close-cropped beard that shone in the light like silk.

He stared at the Deacon with such prolonged attention that the Deacon had to move. He groped clumsily for the bottle, knocked it over, fumbled with it as the whiskey spilled into his lap.

Greene turned a cold and unfriendly glance on Guldager, who jerked his head toward the back room. Greene strode toward it, opened and closed the door.

Deacon Bottle heaved himself up on his feet. He took a step or two in the direction of the bar, and then let himself drift toward that door.

Guldager called sharply, "Stay away from there!"

The Deacon didn't stop. With the bottle of Old Pepper clutched in one pudgy fist, he mumbled something about passing around a drink. Five more paces and he would be close enough to the flimsy door to hear what was being said on the other side. Guldager warned again, "Stay away from there!" His hand slid under the bar.

The Deacon took another step—and then stopped dead in his tracks. It wasn't because of the swift fury which rushed into Guldager's pouchy face. He heard his name come like an explosion from the saloon's doorway.

Rip Carson was standing there, disbelief and anger mingled on his lean face.

Sight of him froze Deacon Bottle. He knew that Guldager was staring at him, studying each move he made with wolflike intentness. The sham of his drunkenness couldn't be dropped.

Rip Carson came across the floor, his jaw set tight. He had grown up with Deacon Bottle as the Deacon's own son, and had come to regard him as the symbol of all that was right and just.

The Deacon knew he might just as well be whipping the boy across the eyes.

Rip Carson put his hand on the Deacon's shoulder, his voice soft. "Come on, Deacon. Let's get out of here."

Deacon Bottle brushed the hand away. "Beat it, kid."

"Sure," Rip said. "I will in a minute. Only I want you to come along too. There's a deal on in Latigo. Feller wants to see you."

Deacon Bottle swayed to his feet. "To hell with Latigo an' to hell with you!" He said more, a good deal more. And he saw Rip Carson's lips go very white.

The boy turned away on his heel. He went to the bar and stood gripping the edge, his back to the Deacon.

There was a shuffling of boots. The rear door opened, and Max Greene came through. His face under its silky beard was taut and strained.

Rip Carson turned at the sound of his footfalls. He recognized Greene and spoke his name and then blurted, "I'm huntin' a job. You got anything open?"

Greene looked carefully from him to Deacon Bottle. "Thought you were bustin' broncs for the Deacon, here?"

"I'm finished with that."

Before he spoke Greene waited so long it didn't seem he was going to answer.

Then he said, "I can sure use a gun-guard."

Guldager's hands were where they'd been before, under the bar. "He's nothin' but a half-growed kid, Max."

Greene shrugged. "The Deacon taught him to handle an iron." He went out into the dark street, and Rip Carson, without looking back, followed him.

Deacon Bottle stood very still, trying not to let the fierce clash of emotions show in his face. Guldager's pale stare didn't shift away from him as the Deacon shuffled on over to the bar.

"Better give me another bottle for when I wake up."

Guldager moved his head. "There's beds in behind."

"Pig-sties, you mean. I'll sleep better in your hay."

Deacon Bottle went outside and down to the barn. The lights in the saloon went out almost immediately. He hesitated for a moment in the lump of darkness which the barn afforded, debating whether or not to get his horse. Deciding against it because of the noise involved, he struck off to the southwest on foot, paralleling the Latigo road.

The hulking outlines of the North Hills were all about him, and only faint starlight sifted down to the rocky and brush-enclosed path he was following.

The staggered, hurt expression on Rip Carson's face kept cropping up in his mind. Rip was a man now and could carry a man's end in a fight, but to Deacon Bottle he was still the golden-haired youngster he had adopted so long ago.

To get out from under that torment he turned his thoughts grimly to the stage line matter. The hold-up had occurred less than a week ago. The stage had been found wrecked, the guard dead. The driver had vanished completely, and with him had vanished twenty thousand dollars in gold dust. A posse from Latigo had unearthed exactly nothing.

Where the hills narrowed to a gaunt cleft through which the road struggled, Deacon Bottle stopped. He called softly, "Enoch?", and at once there was a stirring at the side of the road.

★

FROM among the rocks rose the tall, broad-shouldered shape of Sheriff Enoch Starling of Latigo.

"I was about set to wade into Guldager's after you, Deacon."

"All I could do was wait," the Deacon said. "Nothin' happened till tonight."

"You find somethin'?"

"Take it for what it's worth. Greene showed up to talk to Missouri Krane. Guldager started to throw down on me with a scattergun when I looked interested. The three of 'em, looks like, are in on the deal together."

Starling swore. "Greene an' Krane, eh? With Guldager sidin' 'em. I figgered Greene was too damned smooth when I talked to him."

"Had a record when he came here, didn't he?" asked the Deacon brusquely.

Starling nodded. "Some jam he got into in Idaho. He acted like he wanted to play his cards straight, so I let him alone."

His eyes regulated to the dark by now, Deacon Bottle could make out Starling's craggy features. In the old days of Deacon Bottle's differences with the law, it was Starling's friendship which more than once had given him a break he badly needed.

He didn't want to tell the sheriff what he was going to tell him now.

Starling growled, "There's a way to nail those devils, all three of 'em. How do you figger the next move, Deacon?"

"There ain't a next move—not for me," said Deacon Bottle harshly. "I'm quittin', Enoch."

"Quittin'? Cripes, man—!"

Deacon Bottle's plump face was like stone. "Rip rode up from Latigo. He found me in Guldager's. I had to act drunk an' talk drunk. Things I said to him must have damn' near broke his heart. But if I hadn't said 'em, Guldager might have opened up a gun-fight."

Starling said slowly, "Deacon, there's a reason you can't quit. You'll have to wait an' take your chances on tellin' Rip the why of it later."

Deacon Bottle stared at him in denial.

"There's folks in Latigo—not all of 'em, but some—tryin' to pin the stage job on you," Starling continued. "They claim you hit for Guldager's to blow in part of that twenty thousand dollars. Maybe Greene framed the story—maybe somebody else did—I don't know. The story's there, an' the talk's gettin' stronger. It's too late now to tell folks I put you up to it."

Deacon Bottle didn't answer. He understood now why Rip had come to Guldager's. Rip had heard the talk, had come there, hoping to prove it a lie. But when he found instead that the story was true, he had figured there was only one way to clear the Deacon. That was why he had asked Greene for a job—to throw in his gun on the side of the Law.

Deacon Bottle shook his head. "What folks think ain't as important as tellin' Rip the truth right quick."

For a long time Enoch Starling studied his friend. His voice came low and huskily: "Maybe you're right, Deacon. It was me got you into this, an' I got no right to ask more. I'll take the load from here on in."

The huskiness of his voice told Deacon Bottle what Starling wouldn't admit—that the job was too big for him alone, and that he was gambling the loss of his own reputation.

"Doggone it, Enoch," he began, "if I—"

For once the unceasing vigilance which had brought Deacon Bottle through many moments of peril was relaxed. It was Starling who picked up the threat the darkness held.

It was Starling, snatching for his gun, who roared, "Behind you, Deacon!"

Starling lunged against the Deacon's shoulder, knocking him out of line. At that instant a gun's roar shattered the brooding mountain quiet. Starling went down, struck by the bullet meant for Deacon Bottle.

Spinning, the Deacon was at once the fighting man he had always been. Both of his silver-mounted weapons began to pound the area of the muzzle-flash. That bloom of flame was the only target he had, and it wasn't enough. There was a scurrying in the brush, then the diminishing racket of hoofs.

Swearing, Deacon Bottle knelt beside the sheriff. The bullet had raked along Starling's skull. If he wasn't dying, he was close to it . . . .

CHAPTER TWO

Death Waits at the Hide-Out

IN THE cold half-light of early dawn, Deacon Bottle stopped the down stage from Outlaw River. He stopped it with his gun out, and he knew what kind of a story would be carried to Latigo, but he got Starling aboard.

Rip—well, Rip would have to wait. Starling's job had to be finished first.

He went back along the road to Guldager's. The place was shut down tight, padlocked, and the noise Deacon Bottle made brought no response.

The Deacon, alive to such things, had the distinct impression that he was being watched. He went on down to the barn, his eye cocked on the surrounding hills.

His big black gelding had not been molested, and that fact, too, was meat for consideration. He saddled up and

rode out of the barn, a troublesome thought stirring in the back of his head.

Though he had already examined the scene of the hold-up and found nothing, he couldn't shake off the feeling that the key was there, if he could find it.

The spot lay some half dozen miles in the direction of Outlaw River, and it was there he headed. Not relishing the vulnerability of the road, he cut directly through the hills.

He rode with his shoulders hunched, low-crowned black hat tugged across his eyes. Apparently oblivious to all that went on around him, he missed nothing.

So small a thing as a shadow that slanted the wrong way on the timbered ridge to his right told him that he was being followed. Without seeming to, he rode so that no clean shot could come at him from that ridge.

It was still early when he reached the scene of the hold-up. An effort had been made, apparently, to stop the stagecoach at the summit of a grade. But the coach hadn't stopped. The driver, Hoke Bailey, had either tried to run through, or he had simply jumped and let the stage go.

The stage had traveled some hundred yards past the hump, down a narrow shelf with a canyon on the left of the road. Wheeling fast, it had been unable to negotiate the turn, and had gone into the canyon.

The shotgun guard, already dead, had been found in the splintered wreckage. Of Hoke Bailey and the strong-box there had been no sign. Had he been killed, the Deacon reasoned, there would have been no objection to leaving his body with the guard's.

Carefully Deacon Bottle circled both the hump in the road and the wreck in the canyon. If Bailey, wounded, had tried to crawl to safety, there would be sign to tell of it, and no man's eyes were sharper at that sort of thing than the Deacon's.

His search was fruitless; there was no sign.

It was logical to suppose, then, that Bailey had left with the road agents. Willingly or unwillingly. Which? The Deacon couldn't decide.

In a cove along one side of the canyon he dropped down to reflect on the possibilities. It was then he saw the rider.

A half mile or so to the east, in the direction of Outlaw River, man and horse crossed the road, started to climb across the shoulder of a rocky knoll.

The man pulled in, dismounted and worked for a moment at his stirrup. He stepped up again and rode on out of sight. The stubby figure had been unmistakable. It was Missouri Krane.

Deacon Bottle got to his feet, then he growled at himself for being a credulous amateur. For they had watched his every move. They had even allowed him a horse. Then Krane had shown himself. Such pat circumstances usually betrayed a gun-trap.

Deacon Bottle tightened the black's cinch, grinning. This was a game he understood. He climbed out of the canyon, followed the road for a space, then circled the knoll on a ridge which lay to the west of it.

The ridge gave him a clear view of the broken country leading back into the heart of the hills. He caught another glimpse of Krane, riding at a trot along the base of a cliff which rose sheerly almost three hundred feet above him.

Probably no man in the Latigo country understood the North Hills more thoroughly than did Deacon Bottle. In the days of his brawling with the law he had found sanctuary in them, had ferreted out their best-kept secrets. He was at home on every square foot of their wild and rugged slopes.

For nearly an hour he trailed Krane, just clumsily enough so Krane would know he wasn't wasting his time. As he

moved, he scanned every ridge, every gully and gorge, on either side or ahead of him.

Part of his care sprang from memory, the rest of it from an knowledge of the ways of ambushers.

He saw Krane again, working his way cautiously across a tangle of rock leading into a narrow canyon. Beyond it the hills began clambering abruptly to the higher peaks. And that question began gnawing again—had Hoke Bailey gone willingly or unwillingly?

Methodically the Deacon catalogued this section of the hills for possible hide-outs. Three days had elapsed since the hold-up. If Missouri Krane was still here, so, probably, was Hoke Bailey.

He found what he had been groping for on the map in his mind. It was a gamble, but it was the best gamble he could think of. . . .

Missouri Krane had got across the broken rock and disappeared in the narrow canyon. And Deacon Bottle understood that he was expected to follow. Without making a detour of several miles, there was no other way of getting a horse through into the higher country. In the canyon, or just beyond it, the trap was to be sprung.

★

HE BEGAN working the black across the broken rock. He rode close to the mouth of the canyon, so close the gelding's footfalls echoed hollowly in it. There, not entering, he turned the black sharp left along the bleak wall of granite through which the canyon cut.

He moved fast now, his bulk showing an unlooked-for resilience and speed. Ground-tied, the black would stand through anything but direct gunfire.

On foot Deacon Bottle began to climb along ledges which would take him up and over the granite rampart. Sweat broke out on his round face smirched with beard. He reached the top, almost in the shadow of the high peaks looming against sky which was a burning blue.

A quarter mile away from him, across a flat ragged with stone fallen from above, was the steep base of those main peaks. Crossing that flat was almost worse than going straight up. Tough though it was, it made good cover.

The Deacon came out on the far side. Lying face down among the sun-warmed rocks, he studied the scene ahead of him.

The narrow canyon opened into a broad gully which rose sharply toward the peaks. Missouri Krane was halfway up that gully, well beyond reasonable gun-range, loitering now because he wanted the Deacon to see him and be reassured.

Deacon Bottle combed the gully's flanks. He found what he was looking for —a man stretched out flat, with a rifle barrel poked through a slit between two rocks. The size of the prone figure was evidence enough. Guldager!

Had he ridden out of that canyon, the Deacon would have been a dead man within ten seconds.

That thought concerned Deacon Bottle not at all. It was a hazard he had foreseen and provided for. His interest, instead, centered on the slope immediately in front of him.

What he had expected to find was there —the rotten, half-caved-in timbers of an abandoned mine tunnel mouth. Crazy Nat Boyle, half prospecter and half unbalanced hermit, had worked it years before. He had dug nothing but rock out of his hole, and Deacon Bottle remembered finding Nat's skeleton, drill in hand, at the end of the tunnel.

That broken tunnel mouth lay some hundred and fifty yards up the slope from Deacon Bottle, and he began to crawl toward it. He moved carefully, pausing at intervals for a glance at the scene to his right.

Guldager lay like a mound of stone, the rifle against his cheek.

Krane was moving up the gully at a slower and slower pace. He stopped and made a show of examining one of his mount's hoofs. The Deacon was overdue, and Krane was growing worried or suspicious.

The Deacon was within twenty feet of the mine opening. He covered that twenty feet, ducked inside.

Some distance away he saw a small wavering spot of flame in the blackness. For that first moment he was all but blind.

Almost at his elbow a voice growled, "That you, Guldager?"

Only one move was indicated, and the Deacon made it. He cut down blindly with the barrel of his sixgun in the direction of the voice. Metal struck against bone; struck hard.

The Deacon's powerful left hand groped for that unseen throat, but the throat was already sagging to the floor.

Deacon Bottle stepped across the body, toward the little flame. It was a candle, set in a pile of tallow which indicated other candles had burned down there.

Its eerie glow showed the man lying on his side in an angle of the tunnel. The Deacon would have been shocked if he hadn't already had a shrewd notion as to what he was going to find.

Hoke Bailey was loosely tied, hand and foot. His face had gaunted down till it appeared to be nothing but bone. His eyes were pits of hell, open and burning.

★

DEACON BOTTLE knelt swiftly, untied the ropes. He lifted the stage driver to a sitting position, began to chafe his wrists and ankles.

"Grub!" Bailey croaked. "Get me some grub."

There were some biscuits and a can of water cached in a niche in the tunnel wall. Bailey tore savagely into both.

"Better take it slow," the Deacon warned, and went to the tunnel mouth for a look, one hand filled of biscuits, for he was ravenous too.

Guldager was still flat on his belly, immobile. And Missouri Krane had stopped and was looking steadily toward the narrow canyon, deciding whether he ought to go back in. But apparently the prospect of meeting Deacon Bottle in that twisting death-trap wasn't inviting.

Deacon Bottle frowned at Bailey. "They'll be on top of us pretty quick. Figure you can move?"

"Got to, I reckon. They been starvin' me four days now." He pawed at the supporting timbers, pulled himself shakily upright.

"Just starvin'? Krane knows better tricks than that."

"He started out tryin' 'em," Bailey admitted. "I told him I had a bum ticker that'd stop plumb dead if he gave it any jolts. So he settled for starvin' me."

"You could have told him where the gold was," suggested the Deacon.

"What for? They'd have killed me soon as I did. I git kind of stubborn sometimes, anyhow." He was looking straight at the Deacon, barely able to stand, but not yet whipped. "I git so stubborn, Deacon, I'd kill you if I figgered you was playin' their game for 'em now."

Deacon Bottle chuckled. He left off rubbing the circulation back into Bailey's arms and put one of his silver-mounted sixguns into the driver's hand.

"When it looks that way to you," he said, "use this."

With Bailey following, he went to the mouth of the tunnel.

The guard he had struck down was groaning. had rolled over on his face. A Winchester was propped against the wall beside him. The Deacon picked that up.

"There's twenty feet we got to gamble on," he said. "If we lose there, we lose the works."

Hunched over, going fast, Deacon Bottle covered those twenty feet, with Bailey behind him.

Sheltered by the tangle of boulders strewn along the slope, he worked his way to where it leveled off. Only then did he risk a swift and cautious glance back at the gully.

Missouri Krane had stopped looking at the canyon. His head was turned and he was staring toward the tunnel mouth. Some flicker of movement, apparently, had caught his eye. He lifted an arm at Guldager, who rolled heavily on his side to look back.

Guldager remained where he was. Krane began to trot his horse across the gully toward the mine.

The Deacon swore. This was going to be a close thing.

They had that quarter mile of flat to cover, and Bailey's strength was already playing out. He stumbled, got up, stumbled again. They were in among ragged slabs of stone which had tumbled from above, and there was no level footing at all.

When Bailey went down again, he stayed down, on his hands and knees, gasping for breath. Now that they were in the light, Deacon Bottle saw that the right side of his shirt was stiff with caked blood.

"Both of us—can't make it," Bailey gasped. "I'll tell you where that gold—"

Deacon Bottle heaved him up over a brawny shoulder. "Both of us can make it—or we fight it out here!" he growled.

They were almost to the high granite rampart before the Deacon, laboring for breath, looked back.

The stunned guard was staggering out of the tunnel mouth. He yelled and pointed. Missouri Krane spun his mount, racing for the canyon to cut off the escape.

Al Guldager was lumbering up the slope. He knelt and began to throw bullets across the flat. Lead spatted against rock as the Deacon, carrying Bailey, dropped over the rim, heading for his horse.

CHAPTER THREE

Blood—And Gold!

THE black gelding threw up its head and nickered. Deacon Bottle boosted Bailey into the saddle, slapped the black's rump.

"Get him behind that first ridge, Hoke. Wait there for me."

Clinging to the horn, Bailey started the horse across the broken rock toward the ridge. Deacon Bottle shot twice into the narrow canyon, to give Krane something to think about. Facing the canyon, he retreated toward the ridge. When he had covered some two hundred yards, he found the same nest of rocks he had been looking for.

There he holed up, sprawled out, Winchester tucked through a stony fork. The Deacon could knock a playing card to pieces at two hundred yards, and the first time Krane showed an elbow, Deacon Bottle tore the sleeve out of his coat.

For ten minutes he lay there, and in those ten minutes he fired four shots.

Not even lovable old Deacon Bottle is more popular with readers of STAR WESTERN than the other famous character also created by Robert E. Mahaffay. You'll want to read, in next month's issue, a new Nero Jones novel, "Gambler's Midnight Deadline!" Reserve your copy of the May issue today! At your newsstand April 3rd!

They did no damage—he hadn't expected to do any, for Krane was an expert at this game—but they enabled Krane to spot the rifle barrel in the fork. Also, they were close enough to testify that when the Deacon got a real target he would hit it.

Deacon Bottle left the rifle thrust out through the rocks. On his belly he crawled after Bailey, toward the ridge. Krane would solve that strategy, but not instantly, and when he did there would be a period of debate before any one of the three road agents took the risk of exposing himself.

The Deacon got across the ridge, found Bailey out of the saddle, holding to the horn to keep himself from falling.

"We got maybe fifteen minutes," the Deacon said. "It's a case of take 'em now or lose 'em. Reckon you can get up behind an' hang on?"

He would try, Bailey countered, and he did. The black grunted under its double burden, began to work back out of the hills.

They rode in silence for a time, the Deacon scowling.

"Hoke, that gold. You want to pick it up, or don't you?"

"With me dyin', I reckon we better. Ain't nobody but me knows where it is."

"You ain't dyin', you damn fool!"

"It's back up—the River road—maybe four mile. I had a hunch what was comin'—an' ditched it."

They got to the stage road. Deacon Bottle dismounted and crawled carefully up on a rocky point. He expected what he saw, but that didn't make him like it any better.

Three riders were coming fast out of the hills behind him.

That rifle barrel had held them up longer than he had hoped, but they were covering two miles to his one. Handicapped with a helpless man, he wasn't in any shape to meet them.

For the next mile, heading toward Outlaw River, Deacon Bottle kept the black off the road. Krane couldn't be sure whether he had gone east or west, and it would take time to make sure.

Back on the road, putting the black at a lope, Deacon Bottle's words lashed at Hoke Bailey. Bailey was about through, and if he went under, the gold was gone.

Bailey struggled doggedly to retain consciousness. "Keep lookin', Deacon," he croaked. "There's a rock stickin' out—sort of like a bull chargin'. Holler when you see it."

There were a hundred like that, it seemed to Deacon Bottle. He would rouse Bailey, only to have the driver stare with sunken, burning eyes, then shake his head.

They found it, though, when the Deacon was sure they had covered twice four miles. Bailey gave a broken shout of recognition, and the Deacon, following his trembling, extended arm, worried beneath a heap of brush and rocks.

He came up with the strong-box in his arms—box and sand and gold sacks weighing close on eighty pounds.

At the next rise Deacon Bottle looked back. Missouri Krane, Guldager and the guard were closing the gap fast. There wasn't going to be time to reach Outlaw River. The overloaded black was beginning to show the strain.

Jaw set, Deacon Bottle considered his chances. Continuing to run was hopeless. Making a stand offered little more prospect of success. There were three of the road agents, and when it grew dark they would have him, unless he abandoned Bailey. But he needed Bailey, needed his story, and even if he hadn't, he couldn't leave any man to die.

He was moving toward the black, determined to play it out until he had no further choice, when he heard the rattle of wheels.

It was faint but it was there—the metallic clatter of iron on rock.

Deacon Bottle growled to himself. The afternoon stage bound from Outlaw River to Latigo. He had forgotten it. He calculated the distance Krane and Guldager had still to cover.

The stagecoach came with a bounce and a jerk around the bend. Rip Carson, shotgun across his knees, clung to the hand rail. The driver lifted his whip. . . . And then saw the Deacon.

Deacon Bottle stood in the middle of the road, sixgun in his fist. The mild blue of his eyes turned darker when he saw who was driving.

Max Greene's chin was thrust out, and the afternoon sun glinted against his silky beard. For a moment his whip remained poised, then he lashed down with it. The four horses reached out.

Rip Carson, wiry and ready, had thrown the shotgun to his shoulder before he recognized the Deacon. He lowered it, yelling something.

Greene, snarling, moved like a cat on the stage's rocking seat. With the lines wrapped in his left hand, he whipped a sixgun from under his coat and jammed it against Rip Carson's ribs. Rip's face went a little white.

Through the roaring of the wheels Deacon Bottle heard him shout: "I'll plug him—sure!"

The rig was picking up speed, rolling at the Deacon. He saw Rip Carson writhe aside, and thrust with his elbow.

Greene's gun went off, and then the butt of Rip's shotgun kicked up against Greene's jaw.

Deacon Bottle saw only the start of that last move. He didn't know whether Rip had been hit or not, and he jumped for the head of the off leader. Any kind of slip would have dropped him, to be crushed under hoof and wheel, but he got his hold and hung on.

The horse came within an ace of going down under the Deacon's weight. He staggered, kept his footing, slowed. The rig groaned to a halt, and the following dust swept around it.

Rip Carson hit the ground yelling. "Deacon, what the hell—?"

"He get you, kid?"

"Burned a little hide, is all. What—?"

"Ain't time for talkin' now. I've got Hoke Bailey an' the gold, but there's three gun-hungry gents on my tail."

Rip's lean freckled face split in a grin. "Let 'em come!"

"Can't," the Deacon snapped. "Krane is smart enough to keep us holed up till dark if he can. Bailey's about done in. Got to get him to Latigo and a sawbones. Give me a hand here."

★

HOKE BAILEY was unconscious. Deacon Bottle spread his coat on the floor of the stage and laid Bailey there. There wasn't room to stretch out; he had to lie with his legs doubled up.

Max Greene's jaw was so swollen it was difficult to tell whether it was broken or not. He was out, and it looked as if he would remain out for some time to come.

Deacon Bottle wedged him onto the rear seat with the strong box.

Rip Carson was listening for hoofbeats. "Figure you can out-run 'em to Outlaw River?" he asked.

The Deacon shook his head. He was in the driver's seat, maneuvering the horses around in the road.

"Outlaw River's no better'n here. Latigo's where we want to get, an' that's where we're goin'. Folks shoved wagons through this country 'fore there was roads. And we can too!"

Rip Carson whistled. He wouldn't have said a wheelbarrow—not to mention a stagecoach—could get through the hills except by way of the road. If there was any kind of a track that could be followed, the Deacon would know about it. Never-

theless, it looked like a mighty poor gamble.

Deacon Bottle tossed Rip the lines and pointed to a clump of pines at the mouth of a shallow ravine. "Get past those. Do it quick. I'll meet you there."

He stepped to the wheel and down. With the stagecoach rattling off behind him, he got a stick and set to work smoothing the wheel- and hoof-marks in the road. The job was rough, but it would do until Krane deciphered the trick and came back looking for it.

Deacon Bottle was half way back to the pines, belly down in a stand of brush, when the three riders came at a fast run over the hump. They hammered on eastward and around the bend.

In the ravine Deacon Bottle halted long enough to bind up the wound in Hoke Bailey's shoulder. This trip was going to be a rough one.

He debated taking to the road again, now that Krane and Guldager were on the Outlaw River side of him. It wouldn't do. Krane was certain to return, looking for just that, and overhauling the stage would be a simple matter. The one gamble that might win was a dash straight through the hills.

The stage road had been laid out with a wide bend which permitted easier grades. By cutting across the bend, through the rough country, there was an outside chance of getting to Latigo.

Rip was waiting; he had checked over the harness.

"Look, Deacon, why don't I ride your black—trail along behind so they can't sneak up an' nail us?"

The Deacon nodded. For the time being, anyway, that might be the best bet. He kicked off the brake, and the restless mustangs lunged into the harness.

The stage was rolling—jarring and bucking, rather, and when they hit the end of the ravine, Deacon Bottle saw the broken hills stretching away below him. Once, long ago, before the stage road went in, there had been a pack trail through here.

Unaccustomed to this kind of traveling, with an unfamiliar grip on the lines, the mustangs tried to take over. But Deacon Bottle's profanity pursued them, and the strength in his meaty arm pulled them nearly back on their haunches. They lined out, running well through belly-deep brush.

Thoroughbraces groaning, the rig pitched across the shoulder of a low hill, rumbled down a rock-strewn slope, tilted at an angle that was only a hair's breadth from ruin.

Deacon Bottle poured on the leather. This was better going than he could count on later. The mustangs hit the bottom—it was a dry creek bed—and the stage crow-hopped behind them, slewing first to one side and then the other.

Deacon Bottle squinted at the sun which was dropping fast behind the hills. He had ground to cover before darkness overhauled him. They were in the fork between two barren ridges, and the coach swung like the weight on the end of a string, all but capsizing the mustangs.

Wood splintered. That was a spoke tearing out on a knee of rock. Then they were in the pack trail, or what was left of it.

Crowding brush whipped the sides of the coach. The coach rammed through, horses settling into their collars, the Deacon cursing and handling his lines with the touch of a juggler.

Twice they were stopped cold. The first time Deacon Bottle gambled on a narrow fissure in which the coach stuck fast.

He had to unhook the mustangs. Rip came up and handled them at the end of a rope while the Deacon put his weight and brawn on a pry.

Again, missing a turn in the trail, Deacon Bottle drove the stage thirty feet into a tangled and treacherous bank of shale

which had slid from the bank above. The stage had to be levered out of that, and a quarter of an hour was lost.

The mustangs had had just about all they wanted. Grime and sweat streaked their hides. The Deacon, his round face unrecognizable under its layer of beard and dirt, held them to it.

The hills were rounding off a little, growing less ragged. But his glance went more and more often to the sun which lay close against the peaks, and to the shadows which were spreading fast along the canyons.

And then, behind him, he heard two sharp explosions of Rip's shotgun.

Krane had tracked them down!

CHAPTER FOUR

Last Call for the Deacon

THE DEACON'S stomach pulled up into a cold knot. Rip, back there alone. . . .

The left front wheel hit something, and the stage careened like a floundering ship. It bounced level again; the Deacon, sprawled half off the seat, got his balance. They were rocketing down the sandy floor of a canyon, in fast-dimming twilight. Beyond lay the brakes, and then the river. If they could get past the river!

More gun-thunder behind him was answered by Rip's scattergun, and the sharper cracking of rifles.

Rip was no fool. He had seen the Deacon fight, and knew everything the Deacon could teach him.

Deacon Bottle focused his mind on keeping the horses on their feet. They were slowing—they had to. This intervening ground was hacked and chewed by numberless washes, some shallow, some like knives, all dangerous. The soft dimness lay over them like a mask.

The stage ripped into one of them before the Deacon could stop. It was as close to ugly disaster as they had come. On the brink of it the mustangs reared, then went plunging down. Only the Deacon's voice and the steadiness of his hands pulled them out of a kicking, panic-stricken tangle at the bottom.

The stage hit on one wheel with a crash the Deacon was certain would shatter it. Somehow it held together, staggered and rolled again.

They climbed out of that one where rains had washed down the bank, the mustangs buckling flat to the earth and pulling like demons.

The dim dark bulk of the cottonwoods along the river was less than a mile away. Ten miles of even going would have been better. The Deacon was trapped in the maze of impassable washes that blocked him away from it.

He worried at them like a dog with a bone. He put the stagecoach into holes a madman wouldn't have risked—and got it out. He retreated, circled, called for witchery from the horses, and got it. Dusk was closing in, but he could hear the voice of the river.

Rip Carson came like a shadow out of the dimness, jumped for the back of the stage and crawled across the swaying top.

"They got the black, Deacon. Sorry. It was a lucky shot."

"You all right?"

"Yeah—except I'd rather fight with a handful of rocks than a shotgun; if you ain't got it halfway down a man's throat, you can't hit him."

"Where's Krane's bunch?"

"Comin' along. I worried 'em a little. Know the river's been risin' for the last three days, don't you?"

The Deacon didn't know that, but it couldn't be helped now. There had been a makeshift ford at the back trail crossing. Good or bad, it was all they had.

The stage was rolling on soggy ground now. The wheels were sucking in mud, and in among the cottonwoods it was

nearly dark. Nearby the river was humming recklessly.

"All three of 'em behind us?" the Deacon asked.

"I don't know. They kind of spread out."

Deacon Bottle stood up, talking to the horses. It was so nearly dark now that he couldn't see much. Where there was a gap in the trees the brush stood heavy and thick. As closely as he could remember, this was the ford—if there was anything left of it.

Suddenly and sharply from the rear came a gun's snarl. The bullet chipped the wood of the seat.

The lead team was in the river, water boiling and frothing around their legs. There was no moon yet, and the stream was a swiftly moving band of black flecked with dirty white where it spilled against rocks.

The mustangs didn't want any part of it. They were fighting to break around downstream and get out. The Deacon's whip and his voice and his firm hand pulled them back, edged them into the current.

That gun behind them was still hammering. But it was only one gun. Where, the Deacon wondered, were the other two. If they had got across the river and were waiting to trap him, it was going to be bad.

The push of the river against the wheels was strong. The usual foot of water over the ford had been more than doubled.

The Deacon wondered if, where the current ran hardest, there was any ford left. The mustangs knew. They were slipping and staggering on the stones of the shifting bottom, hating it, trying to swing back the way they had come.

Now they were in it, the steady roar of the river enveloped the coach, dimming the gunfire. Rip Carson lay along the top of the coach, getting in a shot whenever it jerked level.

The water was above the horses' knees now. It was battering against the bottom of the coach, skidding it downstream in spite of all the Deacon could do. The off wheels dropped over a ledge, tilting the coach precariously.

The mustangs were floundering desperately, fighting the river and fighting panic. This was it.

The line of brush and cottonwoods loomed over the far bank. Close but not close enough. Hoke Bailey, unconscious, was going to be trapped inside the flooded coach.

Rip Carson's voice came biting through the turmoil. "Hang an' rattle, Deacon! You'll make it."

But they weren't going to make it. The Deacon blurted, "Rip, them things I said—at Guldager's—they—"

Rip laughed. "Deacon, you're gettin' old. You didn't have me fooled for a minute. Anybody who likes Old Pepper the way you do don't spill it all over hell. He drinks it!"

The thundering force of the river hit the coach, knocking it off the ledge. The current tore at it, sucking it down. Another minute and the mustangs, too, would be ripped off their feet.

Deacon Bottle stood up, his remaining sixgun in his teeth, and jumped. . . .

★

COLD water slugged him; spray lashed blindingly into his eyes. He took a floundering stroke, another. Luck as much as anything else got him up to the lead team, gave him a grip on the bridle. He could feel the terrific tug of the helpless coach. He held the horses steady. They were getting a little purchase, just a little, against that fearful dragging weight.

They hung there evenly balanced—river and mustangs—unable to gain an inch, neither quitting. Deacon Bottle

threw in the weight of his bulk, hip deep in surging water. In the howling blackness time seemed to vanish. As for Hoke Bailey. . . . Well, Hoke's life had been a gamble from the start.

Two spots of fire lashed suddenly out from the bank. The meaning of it slammed at Deacon Bottle. Krane and Guldager had swum their mounts above the ford.

The Deacon's arms felt as if they were being dragged out of their sockets. He couldn't let go. And Rip alone, if he hadn't already been washed off the coach, wasn't going to be enough. The guns on shore exploded again. Krane and Goldager couldn't pick targets in the darkness and flying spray and tangled confusion of the river, but they could pour bullets into it and trust to luck.

A third gun opened up abruptly. It was below the stagecoach, halfway to the bank. A grotesque and distorted figure stood there, shooting toward the bank.

Some trick of the current lessened the pressure for an instant on the stagecoach. The mustangs lunged ahead. A moment of jerking impotence, then a surge and a rush in shallower water.

The stagecoach lumbered drunkenly toward the bank.

Deacon Bottle got a hand free and snatched the heavy sixgun from between his jaws. That humped, unrecognizable figure below him was still shooting.

There were shapes to be seen on the river bank now. The hulking figure of Al Guldager, crumpled down on his knees but with flame still spitting from his gun.

Deacon Bottle shot twice, and the spitting stopped. The mustangs tore away from his grip. He let them go, jumping to avoid the stage.

As it passed him, a man spilled down from the top. Rip Carson landed on his feet. He was yelling, but the Deacon didn't need that warning to spot the stubby, venomous Missouri Krane running at him like a wolf.

He dropped and rolled. Krane's bullet slit his vest across the back. He could have shot before Krane's revolver swung back to cover him, but he didn't have to.

Rip Carson's scatter-gun let loose a blast that hit Krane in the middle like a mallet going through soft wax.

Deacon Bottle got up deliberately. Rip was saying, "That feller on the other side is dead an' goin' downriver, or else he's skipped."

Deacon Bottle started toward that queer humped figure from which valuable fighting had come. It hadn't looked normal because one man had been staggering out of the river with a limp body heaved across his shoulder.

Max Greene was kneeling beside Bailey, rubbing his arms.

Deacon Bottle picked up the silver-mounted sixgun—the one he had given Hoke Bailey, which Greene had used.

"That took nerve," he said, "pilin' out of that coach when it looked like it was a gonner, an' bringin' Hoke with you."

Max Greene stared back with a mixture of sullenness and anger. "He's one of my drivers, ain't he?" he said.

The Deacon nodded—and went to help Rip untangle the stagecoach which had been stopped by the heavy brush a couple of hundred yards back from the river. . . .

While our Armed Forces are striking back for those who must remain home, don't forget that it's up to us to furnish the planes, ships and tanks! Remember Pearl Harbor. . . . And Buy Defense Bonds!

DEACON BOTTLE pushed open the swinging doors of the Desert Eagle Saloon, and the familiar smell made his mouth water. He had seen Enoch Starling, whose bandaged head hadn't prevented his cussing the Deacon soundly for putting him out of the way before the fight started. He had the promise of wizened little Doc Sykes that Hoke Bailey would pull through, and he was intolerably thirsty.

The story had spread through Latigo by this time, and there was a crowd at the bar eager to buy drinks. As a matter of courtesy the Deacon bowed to this decree of the gods before he maneuvered his way to his personal table in the corner where sat Rip Carson and Max Greene.

Greene had an unopened bottle of Old Pepper in front of him, and Rip was working on an apple pie.

As Rip was accustomed to explaining: "The Deacon an' me together don't make enough to keep two men in drinkin' likker —not the way the Deacon figgers it, anyhow—so me, I settle for pie."

The Deacon gave his report, to which Greene listened soberly. "You got an explanation due you, Deacon," the latter said. "I reckon I—"

Deacon Bottle lifted his hand. "You kept Hoke Bailey from drownin'. That's explanation enough for me."

"There's more to it," declared Greene. "I want you to have all of it. I got into a tight over in Idaho. I don't claim I was framed—it was a mistake I'd have given a lot to wipe out, an' couldn't."

There was something like that in the Deacon's own past, and he said softly, "That kin happen."

"I come here to Latigo, Deacon, aimin' to straighten it out with a new deal. Al Guldager followed me, an' he hired Krane to help him. I swear I didn't know anything about that hold-up till it was over with.

"Only Guldager an' Krane didn't get the gold. They thought I knew where it was, so Guldager sent for me. If I didn't help 'em, he said, he'd bring up that Idaho trouble an' ruin me. I went to Guldager's —that's what you saw—an' met Krane in the back room. I told him to go to hell. You can believe that or not, because Krane's not alive to prove it."

Deacon Bottle nodded slowly. "I believe it."

"On the way out," Greene continued, "Rip, here, braced me for a job. I figured that if I took him maybe I could get you to throw in on my side too. Then, when you stopped the stage, it looked like you an' Rip were workin' together—on Guldager's side. I done what seemed best, but it wasn't quite good enough."

The Deacon grinned. "Rip here showed up to be quite a sizable chunk of fightin' meat. You sure your jaw ain't broke?"

"The way it feels I'd settle for a broke jaw, but the Doc said it ain't."

Deacon Bottle reached for the Old Pepper. "Then that leaves us just one thing to be thrashed out." He turned a frosty eye on Rip, who was looking pretty pleased with himself.

"Durin' our jaunt across the river," said Deacon Bottle, "it was suggested by individual B that individual A was gettin' old and knot-headed. Individual A is hereby invitin' individual B out into the alley behind here to git that notion knocked out of his head."

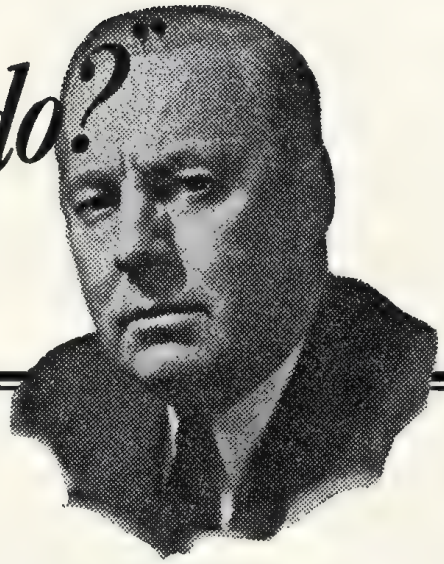
Rip Carson, with his mouth full of apple pie, came within an ace of choking. He got it down somehow, and gasped:

"Deacon, I was so blamed excited I don't remember a thing about it. If any man—or an army even—was to call you old an' knot-headed, I'd tackle 'em with my bare hands!"

Solemnly Deacon Bottle extended his hand for the Old Pepper. "Don't let it happen again," he said.

THE END

"What can I do?"



"LIKE millions of other Americans, I've asked myself one question repeatedly ever since these fateful words popped out of my radio:

"'Japanese planes have bombed Hawaii!'

"Daily, nightly, I've turned this question over and over in my mind—with the reading of every news bulletin on the air and the appearance of every epic headline.

"What can I do—here at home?

"What can I do—while Americans are fighting and dying in the far reaches of the Pacific for freedom and for me?"

"What can I do?

"I've looked in my shaving mirror for an answer—and found none.

"I've seen only the perplexed face of a middle-aged man—a man too old to bear arms.

"I've glanced at my hands, too, a thousand times, only to learn a brutal truth.

"They are soft and white—strangers to the production line where only skilled hands are wanted now."

"What can I do?

"Only last night I found the answer as my eyes fell on my wife's knitting bag and my ears caught the click of her knitting needles.

"I could give to the Red Cross. I could answer its urgent call for funds, now so sorely needed.

"I could give to the limit of my means to aid and comfort those who are giving so much more.

"Yes—I could do something. Not much—but something.

"And I have—today."

Give and give generously—to your local chapter—to volunteer solicitors. Give when you can, where you can, as much as you can.

SEND CONTRIBUTIONS TO YOUR LOCAL CHAPTER

AMERICAN RED CROSS
WAR FUND CAMPAIGN

THIS PAGE CONTRIBUTED TO THE AMERICAN RED CROSS BY THE PUBLISHERS

By Tom Roan ★ GUNS UP—

"God," argued Bullwhip Bill McCrackin, "owned all this water, air an' grass, mister, long before you got ary shyster to give you a lease on it!" But that reckless old champion of the range-starved B Bar 5 was to find that the Lord also seemed to favor the outfit that "got there fustest, with the mostest guns!"

CHAPTER ONE

Blacksnake Work for the Bullwhip Man

BEHIND him the cattle dragged sluggishly through the shimmering heat waves hanging like dry, hot steam over the valley between the low ridges to eastward and the gaunt range of sun-baked mountains to the west.

There was no water in this whole Blowing Sand Country. That was the hell of it! There had been a mirage here and there of green trees and great blue lakes, lasting just long enough to irritate a man, just long enough to lift his spirits, then crush them as the sights faded like

HERE'S BULLWHIP BILL!

The man came down heavily on his shoulders, his pistol slithering out of his hand. . . .

Great Range Pirate Novel

fantastic pictures swallowed back into the heat and blinding sunlight. There was no vegetation to speak of, merely a colorless clump here and there, as dry as powder, sucked dry by the pitiless sun.

Yes, that was the trouble with a lot of this Nevada country. Hotter than hell by day and cold enough at night to make a man's teeth chatter, as he lay trying to sleep in his blankets while the half-dead herd of three thousand skinny B Bar 5 cattle lowed and bawled around him. A

man couldn't push the fool herd at night without risking the loss of half the wall-eyed critters in the wind-sucked arroyos and dry ravines, where they'd die.

Twenty-foot blacksnake coiled in front of him, Bullwhip Bill McCrackin cursed as he rode with his surly, heavy-set figure slumped in the weather-cracked old Mexican saddle on Gabriel's Trumpet. His battered gray hat seemed to have gathered pounds of dust on its broad, flat brim. That dust, laying on his shoulders, made him look as if he had come through a snow-storm; yet the end was in sight. Up the valley there was a break in those dusty mountains. Through that break a man could already glimpse the green timber growing on the higher slopes. There would be water and grass back there—once they got through to it.

He turned in his saddle, scowling back at the herd that was strung out for more than a mile. Just ahead of what was supposed to be point rode Old Bud Jensen and his daughter Olga. Behind the herd, just topping a rise, came the two big, ramshackle old chuck-wagons trailed by the B Bar 5's remuda with every horse in it so worn down a man was ashamed to ride one of them.

Hard-bitten, them Jensen folks! They'd stayed too long out there on those flats. By sheer grit and loyalty their eleven riders, a bald-faced Chinese cook and a Mexican wrangler, had remained with them. Payday for that bunch had not come in so long they would have to learn to count money again—if they ever saw another dollar.

Sourly, McCrackin turned back in his saddle, wondering how the devil it was that he was always monkeying with the other fellow's troubles. He had no business burning the daylights out of himself by poking along with his half-dead outfit. Yet he had shared their grub in a camp eight nights before, and the die had been cast.

"Dammit," he'd told them, "there's water an' grass west of yuh. *Whut,* I ask yuh, does it matter if yuh do bust over the California line an' get in the timber-belt country controlled by a lot of rich grafters with a strong finger in the pie called politics? There's water an' grass dyin' back there to be drunk an' et, an' we're goin' through. To hell with politicos! Just 'cause them roosters back there have got down on their knees beggin' yuh for votes to get elected ain't no sign they own yuh—an' the whole durned nation besides."

He turned and looked back once more at the slow-weaving cloud on the ground behind him. The break in the mountains was right at hand. He felt a throb of renewed life in Gabriel's Trumpet as the old white horse suddenly lifted his head, snorted the dust from his nostrils, and started breaking into a trot on his own accord. McCrackin felt something else then.

It was a breath of cooling wind, a little startling as it brushed his cheek. Wheeling in his saddle he waved his hat. Then swore as a cloud of dust from the brim swirled around his face, choking him.

Within the next mile it was like stepping from hell to paradise as he wound through the break in the hills from the hot lands outside to the growing coolness of water and green vegetation ahead.

A dry creek bed was underfoot, one that had once held a sizable stream until something had made it change its course from winding and trickling out on the desert for eighty miles to give life to the arid lands. Brackish water showed in several places and old Gabriel's Trumpet wanted to stop at the first pool. McCrackin made him keep up his head with a tight rein and spurred him on.

"A bullsnake couldn't drink that, much less a fine old hoss like yuh!" he growled. "There's water ahead, good water, by golly, an' I smell 'er."

Another glance back just before he turned a bend showed Old Bud Jensen and his yellow-haired Olga turning into the break. Their horses were fretting and wanting to gallop at the smell of water. And beyond the old man and his pretty daughter the cattle had caught it. A faint, far-away bawling lifted. The dust boiled back there as wall-eyed brutes licked their dry tongues and shuffled into a trot, then into a slow stampede.

It was going to be dangerous here in a very few moments. McCrackin swung around to watch. The cattle were forming in a great, pointing wedge. All through the herd the excitement was beginning to spread as if crackling electricity touched each lowered head and horn. Even to the rear of the herd the stragglers were throwing up their heads. The old chuck wagons seemed to jolt into a faster pace. Behind them the remuda surged, dust boiling, saddle stock threatening to get out of hand.

"Come on!" yelled McCrackin when the girl and her father were close enough to hear him. "The boys back there know enough to keep out of the rush. Water ain't far, an' we've got to get in the clear before all them cows jam us in this narrow hole!"

In single-file they galloped on. Around the bend there was a small, bowl-like valley with steep slopes running up at every hand. As if even grass could smell water, patches of green were growing here. Straight ahead the valley narrowed into what appeared to be a gradual slope-up between the high walls of a dark gorge. Even a man could smell the water now . . . . But it was not for long.

The sudden crashing of rifles just ahead threw the three riders into instant confusion. Bullets whistled all around them. It was as if a wall of men had taken sudden place three hundred yards up the gorge, and had opened fire without warning.

"Swing 'er!" bawled McCrackin, curving Gabriel's Trumpet to the right so quickly his right stirrup dragged the ground. "In the clear! Fast, folks!"

Cattle were right behind them now. The sharp hammering of cloven hoofs filled the air, the sounds growing into a rattling, crashing din. In a furiously driving wedge, the cattle surged on into the gorge, not to be stopped by bullets or a thousand men. Several of them staggered, bawled, and went down as they were knocked off their feet in the murderous fire up the gorge, but it seemed to only quicken the pace of the brutes bringing up the rear.

It was grand-slam hell on the move. Caught in its terrible current, McCrackin, the old man and the girl were swept half-around the little valley by the choking sea of cattle pouring into it. The stampeding herd jammed together in a steady swelling to get into the mouth of the gorge and the water ahead that was driving every brute crazy with its maddening smell.

AS A great, spinning swirls down through the spout of a giant funnel, it was finally over. The last steer disappeared and the three riders

Tom Roan, author of this rip-snorting range-pirate novel, has written an action yarn of North-range outlaws that you'll want to read—in April *10 STORY WESTERN!* Don't miss "Owlhooter's Election Day"—or any of the nine other tales of high adventure in the early West that you'll find in this all-star issue! On sale March 11th!

crowded to safety, as high as they could get on the steep slope. The last of the cattle were riding each other as if those behind would mount the backs of the others and go on over them in their frenzied dash for the water. McCrackin turned to follow the brutes, his shapeless, dusty hatbrim over his eyes.

But again they were forced to spur their horses and get out of the way. The remuda was coming, a pawing, plunging cloud of damnation gone mad, no longer held in check by the wrangler. Tails flying and manes whipping the wind, the last of the saddle horses were gone in less than a minute.

Now McCrackin pushed ahead, followed by the old man and the girl while the rest of the B Bar 5 riders swirled in after them. The lumbering chuck wagons brought up the rear like swaying and plunging ghosts coming through the dust with their drivers sawing their lines and yelling at their horses as they tried to curse some sense into the heads of those wall-eyed brutes.

It was not a pretty mess when McCrackin led the way on through the gorge. There were eight dead and dying steers to dodge before they came to the place where the shooting had taken place. They swept past the bodies of three men who had gone down in the stampede before they could whirl back to waiting horses and make their escape, as others with them in the gorge had done.

But a man could have scarcely recognized the torn and flattened shapes on the ground as men. They were simply shapeless lumps of broken bones and flesh half buried in the ground. The leading cattle had knocked them off their feet. Once down, the hammering and splitting hoofs had done the rest, grinding them into shreds of what had once been men and leaving their rifles beside them twisted and shattered wrecks of guns fragments of metal and wood.

Not at once did McCrackin see other men ahead. They followed the gorge and came out on the broad, flat back of a timbered ridge, five hundred yards from its mouth. Not far ahead now was the water —a creek following along the ridge for a mile before it bent westward at a sharp angle to go spilling back into the hills, instead on out to irrigate the arid lands, where it had been going for countless years.

The cattle and the remuda—all fighting for the first chance to get at the water—had scattered up and down the stream. Every muzzle was now dripping water while every man's interest was centered on the thought of what had happened to the hidden gunmen. There were plenty of places for them to hide, but there was no sign of them until the wagons came on through. The drivers were struggling to see that their hot animals did not gorge themselves when they first reached the water.

McCrackin was watching the timber when he let Gabriel's Trumpet take a half-dozen big gulps of water. Then, spurring the horse back out of the stream to give the animal a chance to cool before he had his fill, he pulled rein with a scowl as he glimpsed three riders slowly coming out of the timber.

They were a hard-looking trio from the start, each armed with a six-shooter at either hip and a rifle thrown across his lap. The man in the lead was dressed in black and rode a big, bald-faced sorrel, A flashy dude, that hombre.

He was big, as red-headed as a woodpecker and his face was covered with a short beard. On the left side of his vest, glittering like a half-blinding eye, was a ball-pointed star.

Behind the first rider was a tall, lean man of seventy. A hawk-faced man, he was, gray-bearded and dressed in gray, and—as if he held full patent rights to the color—he was riding a gray horse.

Thirty feet behind that rider rode something that might have been ripped out of a nightmare and thrust into the saddle of a huge, black horse that looked at first like an overgrown Belgian stallion.

That third man—if it could have been called a man—sat like a fat frog in his saddle, a figure as gaudily dressed as a circus clown ready to lead a parade. He was a beardless and hairless wonder from the start, a man whose crotch seemed to extend all the way up to his breast bone. His eyes were enormous and popping in the huge, round pink face of a huge pink head as round as a pumpkin. Great-armed and stumpy of chest and shoulder, he was more like a hairless, baby-faced gorilla on a horse than anything else.

His saddle was just as enormous, high, flat horn flaring out on front of his chest. A long black cigar hung in the right side of a mouth which a man would not have been able to cover with his entire hand.

"Delirium tremens on a hoss!" growled McCrackin as Old Bud Jensen moved up beside him to the left while the girl edged up to his right. "An' me . . . . Now, I thought I'd seen them all from the hoot-owl pickin' a banjo, to a pistol-shootin' horned toad!"

"Yo've seen 'em all now," nodded Jensen. "What do yuh make of 'em, Bill?"

"Wouldn't know." McCrackin was still staring at the thing on the black horse. "It ain't Hallowe'en time is it?"

"Howdy!" The red-bearded horseman pulled rein fifteen feet away with the others halting behind him. He looked straight at Jensen, ignoring McCrackin and the girl. "Sizable lookin' outfit yo've got. I'm Zobe Van Zyle, chief deppity sheriff from Lost Lode Canyon"—he jerked his head to westward—"twelve or fourteen miles over the way. Yo're Bud Jensen of the B Bar Five?"

"That's right," nodded the cattleman. "Had to have water, an' here we are. Burned out east of here, an' dry as a powder keg all the way along Ramblin' Creek."

"Too bad." The deputy placed both hands on his saddle horn, and looked at the cattle with a frown. "Yuh know, o' course, that yo're on private property?"

"Nope, didn't know it," put in McCrackin. "Thought it was government land."

" 'Tis in a way," frowned Van Zyle. "Leased out, though. Which makes it as good as private. Timber lease, yuh see, an' of course they don't 'low cows or cow-outfits in the timber. Danger of fire of late. Gov'ment orders on that."

"I know," agreed McCrackin. "Been hearin' a lot of Gov'mint lately. Lot about fires, too. In the old days the Indians used to set fire to the woods spring an' fall, killin' off the underbrush an' such. Nobody heard of fires them days. Politicians come along. Got to have jobs for somebody, an' the underbrush had to be let alone—"

"If I was talkin' to yuh," cut in the deputy," I don't remember it. I guess Jensen's cows got the upper hand an' just come in on their own hook for the water. Of course," the man's eyes narrowed, "yo'll get 'em out right away, Jensen?"

"I'm talkin' to yuh, if yuh ain't to me," answered McCrackin. We're goin' out, yeah, but first we'd like to know who owns this lease yo're talkin' about. Do yuh know?"

"That is a simple matter." The strange, froglike, hairless wonder on the black horse now pushed forward. He spoke in a hollow, half-chuckling croak. "I'm Gaspar Dominee. I own the timber here."

"Good, so far," noddde McCrackin. "An' that bein' clear, maybe yuh can tell me who stole this crick. I see a dam of logs an' rock filled in with dirt up yonder behind yuh."

"Mr. Dominee owns the water rights to that crick," put in Van Zyle. "Filed on 'er all legal an' clear, an' had a right

to change the crick if he saw fit to change 'er."

"That's a lie yuh could have helped from tellin'." McCrackin's voice was low and flat. "Gawd owns the water an' the air, though lawyers have figured out a way, here an' there, to take it away from mankind. If Dominee had that dam put in, he stole that water, an' stealin' water from folks an' cattle used to be a hangin' matter in these parts!"

★

HE GLANCED around, looking narrowly at the gang of B Bar 5 riders drawn up behind him. "But the water's still here, in spite of tin-horn shysters. That water's the life-blood, meat an' bone of this outfit. So is the grass an' underbrush this herd'll eat, clearin' out the forest, so to speak, without charge to Dominee. We aim to stay here until fall."

"In that case," snorted the deputy, "I'll have to arrest the whole damn push of yuh!"

"That's fine," agreed McCrackin with an evil grin. "An' just who the hell's goin' to help yuh?"

"United States troops, if it comes to that!" snapped the deputy. "An' get this straight, smart fella: I've had enough of yore lip. I don't want to have to pull yuh off that graveyard hoss yo're on an' kick yore teeth down yore throat!"

Bullwhip suddenly in his hand, McCrackin was out of his saddle before Jensen could reach out and grab him. Dropping his reins and hitching up his belts, he moved forward and clamped his hand on the deputy's left knee. "The river ain't deep, an' yuh don't have to swim. If that fried egg thing on that black hoss is payin' yuh to do his fightin' he might crawl down an' help yuh."

"Hold on, gentlemen!" croaked Dominee with some of the pinkness of his face giving way to a sickly yellow. "Hold on! This won't do!"

"No, it won't!" shot back McCrackin. "It didn't do, either, when a gang of yore gunmen tried to stop us from comin' in here. Three of yore monkeys are down that gorge back there. The cows musta caught 'em an' tromped 'em into the ground. Better get 'em an' get outa here.

"But," he glowered back up at the deputy, "if yo'll just crawl off that bronc I'll accommodate yuh at a first-class tooth-stompin', yuh red-headed lump of dawg meat. Get down!" He gave the man's leg a jerk. "Why yuh waitin'?"

"Yuh asked for it!" the deputy shouted. And it looked as if the man was coming down to fight as he suddenly plunged his bald-faced sorrel to one side. knocking McCrackin off his feet as the horse whirled. "Yo'll get it!"

It was attemtped murder then. The sorrel was whirled. In a madman plunge, his rider shot him back to McCrackin before he could roll clear. It was an attempt to ride him down, but McCrackin flattened himself on the ground, knowing no horse but a born killer would step on a man when he was down, unless by accident.

At the last instant the sorrel leaped. His hoofs cleared McCrackin as Van Zyle snarled something. At a dozen feet away he snatched the horse to a halt for another quick swirl-around. Before he could make it, there was a sound like a shotgun exploding at the back of the deputy's head. It lifted him, seemed to straighten him out in the air, and sent him pitching headfirst from his saddle and rooting along the ground on his face as his horse leaped away.

It was that bullwhip. Uncoiling from McCrackin's hand, like a snake shooting to its mark, its rawhide lash had struck. Now it came back—the same furious streak of black lightning in the air—and struck again.

The tall old man had swung his horse to one side, a claw-like right hand clutching the butt of a six-shooter. Before he could draw his gun he was rocking back in his saddle, whip catching him on the forehead. As a stick of wood standing upright in a saddle might fall, the man heeled over, and came smashing down on the ground.

McCrackin was on his feet by this time, the whip ready to blast that fried egg thing out of the saddle. To his surprise the man's hands were lifting. The pink face with its yellow splotches had become a contorted mask. Gaspar Dominee looked like he was trying to whistle and smile at the same time.

"I say," he croaked, "I say, yo're damned good with that whip, do you know? Gave him—gave 'em both just what they needed, my good friend. Don't left leg and slid cautiously out of his saddle, his beautifully inlaid six-shooters dangling at his hips.

"Now," he croaked, "now I'll take care of these two piles of scum."

Once out of his saddle Dominee was taller than he looked. Yet at the same time he was more of a monstrosity than ever. No man could have told his age, though it was a certainty that he was past forty. His legs were like two wabbly stilts, fancy-chapped, the feet red-booted, like two huge, flappy pads on the ends of fishing poles. Those feet seemed to fit well enough with the man's torso. Yet the abbreviated length of that torso made the legs look too weak to carry it about.

"Lige Cutter was always a fool." Dominee glanced at the tall old man just beginning to stir. "Most people in this country are too quick to draw a revolver.

Watch for the next hard-hitting Tom Roan novel which will appear in the May issue of STAR WESTERN! A thrilling saga of gun-marshal law pitted against the famous Thunderbolt Kid and his two fugitive pardners! Next issue on sale April 3rd!

—don't strike me! Of course you can—can stay here. Never will it be said that Gaspar Dominee drove starving cattle away from water. No, sir, my friend, *no, sir!*"

CHAPTER TWO

The Gun-Boss of the Sierras

McCRACKIN stepped back, waiting and watching, the glistening whip coiled like a pet snake at his feet. He was not at all fooled by that sickly, half-whistling smile on Gaspar Dominee's huge face. He'd seen smiles like that before.

As if he was satisfied that he had stopped all danger that might suddenly be flung his way on the tip of that whip, Dominee now sheathed his rifle under his At times, it angers me beyond measure."

Cutter's gangling legs were drawing up, as if pulling their feet out of thick mud. His right foot rocked on its spurred heel. His chest heaved as if with a quick inrush of breath. At a sudden fluttering of his eyelids he grunted. Dominee prodded him with the toe of his boot. In a limber sprawl the old man sat up, eyes popping open owlishly, his hands pawing backward and clawing into the grass behind him as props to hold him there.

"No more foolish plays out of you, Lige!" warned Dominee. "I won't stand for it. I give the orders around here and pay well for the right to give them. Here, I'll take your weapons to make certain of you. Get up—and keep your mouth shut!"

He helped Cutter to his feet, and quickly reached for the old man's six-shooter

to stab them down inside his own high waistband. Leaving Cutter standing there, leaning against his horse with one hand on the saddle horn for support, Dominee moved forward on his long bullfrog legs, as busy now as a hen gathering two unruly chicks under her wings. He bent over Zobe Van Zyle, taking his six-shooters as the deputy arose to his hands and knees with an explosive grunt.

"On your horse, Zobe," ordered Dominee, sucking and smacking his huge lips, a booted toe suddenly prodding the man's ribs. "You and Lige are getting out of here with me. Keep your mouth shut!"

"He shot me, damn 'im!" The deputy was suddenly on his feet in a brutal heave and a wild jump that knocked Gaspar Dominee down in a backward sprawl. "I'm a killer, by Gawd, an' I won't stand for no foul play like this. I'll wring his—"

It was as far as he got. To the amazement of McCrackin and all the rest of the B Bar 5 crowd, from Olga Jensen to her father, Gaspar Dominee was up like a man-of-Mars thing made of bouncing rubber. Splintery legs wabbling and stabbing their huge feet into the ground, he weaved in, powerful arms and great mauls of fist set.

"When I buy the damned law," he croaked, "I buy it body and soul. You'd knock me down, would you?"

He drove one lightning-like blow straight to the deputy's stomach with man-crushing force behind it. Another smashed with all the noise of a breaking plank on Van Zyle's jaw. Before the man could fall—and even as he was reeling, a lightning rain of blows ripped to his face. Those rapidly sledging fists seemed to hold him in mid-air until a final blow sent him flopping heels over head to the ground in an unconscious wad.

The Devil himself was on the move now as Dominee swung back to Lige Cutter. "I told *you* what to do!"

The old man let out a yelp of terror and tried to get out of the way. He was not fast enough. That terrible, misshapen, half-human thing was upon him. Two of his lightning blows drove like killer hammers into the old man's face, blood flying.

Cutter went down, half under his startled horse. In a flash two powerful arms spun him over head, and then smashed him to the ground as if Gaspar Dominee was devil-bent to crush every bone in his body.

"And now—and now!" cried Dominee, "I've told you damned paid curs, you infernal law thieves—"

He stopped, turned, and looked at the wide-eyed Olga Jensen. His mouth smacked. A broad grin suddenly spread across his face, swelling his cheeks until his eyes were almost closed. Enormous teeth shone through the wide lips.

"Excuse me, Miss Jensen," he croaked, his smile suddenly dropping, eyes staring. "Excuse me. It is very naughty when a gentleman loses his temper in front of a lady. Exceedingly ugly in the presence of such a pretty lady." His voice dropped to a half-sane purring. "Your skin, my dear, is so fair, and your eyes are so blue."

He turned, stooped, and picked up Zobe Van Zyle in his two hands as a man would lift a light bar from the ground with no effort at all. At arms' length he swung the man above his head, stepped nimbly to the side of the deputy's bald-faced sorrel, and threw the limp figure across the saddle. He did the same thing with Lige Cutter, and then quickly mounted his own horse.

With a final ogling grin at the girl, he turned, smacked his lips at her, and started riding back up the slope with the horses of the two unconscious men following him. Fifty yards away he suddenly drew rein, swung his black half-around, and sat there looking at the crowd.

"By the way, Jensen," he called back,

"I'll take your herd off your hands if you want to sell. I'll pay spot-cash, in gold, and three dollars a head when you are ready. If you think you won't sell to me, don't let sundown find you here!"

Then, whirling his horse before Jensen could answer him, he was gone, fading away in the forest with the two laden horses behind him shuffling into a trot at his black's heels.

★

OLGA JENSEN slumped lower in her saddle as she expelled a deep breath of relief. "And that was Gaspar Dominee—small wonder they call him the Ogre of the Sierras!"

"He ain't built much like an auger," growled McCrackin, missing the point entirely. "Still, he's built crazy enough to give me the creeps. Reckon he was born like that?"

"Gaspar Dominee," explained the girl, "is what can be called a cretin giant. As a general thing, though usually little more than dwarfs, they come from the Alpine valleys of Switzerland and Italy, also the Pyrenees, Syria, India and China. It has something to do with the goiter. Not all have big heads like that, but he's a cretin just the same. You can bet that he takes medicine all the time. Without it he would become an absolute imbecile."

"Yuh talkin' Greek?" McCrackin glanced up at the girl. "If yuh are, it don't make no sense to me. That fella's as loco as a snowblind yearlin' on the prod. Strong as a bull, too. Made me plumb downcast the way he picked up them fellas an' slapped 'em across the saddles. Shootin' him, I reckon, would be like shootin' a crazy man. Still," he scowled, "somethin' tells me it's got to be done sooner or later."

"An' already I feel like shootin' 'im," muttered Jensen, still staring at the timber where the man had disappeared. "Three dollars a head for my cattle! That's why they turned the water in Ramblin' Creek, Bill. He knows cattle can't live out there on the range without it. He knows a lot of men will come like we did. He can drive them out, back to certain death or force them to sell on the spot—an' he's got the government to back his play, 'cause of that timber lease."

"We'll see about that." McCrackin turned and caught up his reins with his whip which now coiled around his shoulder. "The thing for us to do is push on from here as soon as the outfit can stand it. Let's have some coffee an' eat a little snack. My belly's beginnin' to growl."

They saw three men riding down the slope a short time later. Each man led a saddled horse behind him. They kept their distance, heading for the gorge, and soon came out of it with the bodies of the men the cattle had killed. As if they had orders to go and come as quickly as possible the three riders and their dead were soon disappearing back into the timber.

"This time," remarked McCrackin, "it looks like orders are bein' followed."

Beyond the muffled reports of three distant shots in the timber it was the last they were to see of them for many hours to come. During the latter part of the afternoon, McCrackin had B Bar 5 riders tear out the dam in the creek while he rode guard with Bud Jensen the wrangler, and four more men on the slopes.

With logs and rocks removed the creek again sprang back to its original course. By noon people far away on Rambling Creek would see the water returning and new life gradually on the move into the arid lands.

Before darkness had settled they had moved on with the worn-out herd. The outfit was brought to a halt in a deep, broad valley beyond another chain of high humps and ridges to westward. There was another little stream here, and in this place there was grass. It was not the best

in the world, but the cattle fell to it like hungry wolves, some of the weakened steers lying down to eat everything in a circle around them. The grass would get better as they pushed deeper into the hills and valleys.

Under a strong guard they slept, but they were awakened several times during the night by the distant squalls of what sounded like wild animals prowling the high slopes. Some of those sounds were made by wild animals, but not all of them. Watching eyes of men were up there in the darkness, studying the camp and keeping close tab on it.

"Yuh'd think," growled McCrackin as he was having his morning coffee and bacon at the end of the cook wagon at daylight, "that they're afraid of losin' us, even big as the outfit is. But that ain't it. They want us to know they're still up an' about, an' we won't be long in seein' 'em again."

California had held a lot of charm for him in the past. No one could help liking this part of the world. But as a man always on the go—sometimes crossing state lines with a posse hard at his heels —Bullwhip Bill McCrackin had made friends and enemies alike each time he had set foot in the country.

Any number of warrants were yet on file for him in the governor's office in Sacramento, and there was one big clique in this state that would not stop short of moving heaven and earth to see him hanged. Old reward posters, offering five thousand dollars for his arrest inside the State of California, still hung in sheriff's offices up and down the country, and many men would like to collect on him.

He was thinking of that particular reward just when the sun was coming up. A gang of horsemen were coming down the slopes at the north end of the valley. It was a sizable outfit this time. More than twenty well-armed men were riding behind a broad-shouldered man.

A star glittered on the leader's chest. Leaning against the pan-box of the cook wagon, McCrackin saw Zobe Van Zyle and Lige Cutter. Beyond Cutter, riding that same sprawl-legged black, trailed Gaspar Dominee.

★

LOOKS like a bear-huntin' crowd, all right." McCrackin glanced at Jensen and his daughter. He had saddled Gabriel's Trumpet. The old white horse stood just beyond him, ready for anything. "But don't lose yore head, Bud. I still say Gawd made the water an' the air, an' I think—yeah, I'm willin' to fight for what I think, too—that the grass should be free when it grows for nothin' only to go to waste."

The excitement of the others did not bother him. He was studying that big, dark-bearded man on the pinto. There was something of the flashy dude in the man, and yet he was a hard hombre who carried a six-shooter at either hip as well as one in a saddle holster. Great white hat on the back of his head, he wore black bangs combed forward and trimmed in a hard, straight line down across his forehead just above his bushy brows. That dude would be the sheriff of Lost Lode Canyon— the bull himself out to take charge of a ticklish situation and tromp it into good order.

They came on like a galloping half-moon, sweeping forward with the sheriff in the lead. When the crowd was forty yards away the fast pace was broken. The main body of riders stopped at a safe distance, and the sheriff rode ahead. Behind him, swinging their horses to a one-sided halt, were Van Zyle and Cutter, their faces swollen and mottled with court-plaster from the beating they had received at Gaspar Dominee's terrible fists.

"'Mornin'!" The sheriff pulled rein,

dark eyes glancing over the crowd. It was evident for a moment that he did not see McCrackin standing there half-hidden behind the pan-box. "Bein' somewhat sensible lookin', yuh folks know there's such a thing as law in the land, I reckon?"

"Go on," ordered Jensen, "an' get it over with."

"Well," scowled the mounted man, "I'm the Sheriff Hat Hatfield. I've got John Doe warrants for ever' one of yuh, an' I'm carryin' a Jane Doe warrant for the girl. The charge—if yuh want it with no fancy trimmin'—is murder!"

"For what?" demanded McCrackin, stepping forward. "Them three killer monkeys what got tromped by the cattle in the gorge?"

"They was not only tromped!" snapped the sheriff. "They'd been shot through the head, as well."

"That clears some things," nodded McCrackin. "We heard three shots in the timber not long after the dead men had been carried away. That was right thoughtful of somebody. It wasn't much trouble to shoot dead men through the head an' make it look like gun-play for a good case in court. We didn't fire a shot."

The sheriff did not answer him. He was sitting there in his saddle, eyes widened and staring now at McCrackin. McCrackin saw a splotch of paleness creeping back through the man's bristly beard. The sheriff's left hand was growing white.

"A murder charge can be right bad on a fella," McCrackin was going on. "With the right men behind it to push it."

"Yeah," answered the sheriff with a strange, hard grind in his tone. "They say such things are hard on a man, especially in California, brother."

"Yuh speakin' of California, California?" A slow, widening grin was spreading across Bullwhip McCrackin's face. "Yuh shorely wouldn't be thinkin' of California, Missouri?"

"I—I don't know what the hell yo're drivin' at," stammered the sheriff. "I'm Hat Hatfield—"

"We didn't ax yore name," cut in McCrackin gently, the smile on his face now a little warped. "We was speakin' of murder. Out here they still have to try some cases. Back yonder in the California I'm talkin' about, they have some cases tried, an' the rope waitin' for its man. Moniteau County, Missouri, I mean. Never heard of it, did yuh?"

"Well." Gaspar Dominee was pushing forward, "what are we waiting for, Hat?"

"Some trouble with them warrants has got 'im stuck, Mr. Dominee." McCrackin answered him, now grinning broadly. "They ain't made out legal an' proper."

"What's this?" Dominee's huge eyes turned a walling stare on the sheriff's pale face. "What's he saying, Hat?"

"I think—I think," the sheriff's voice had become a croak, "we'd better check things over, Gaspar. Yes," he filled his lungs with a deep breath and expelled it with a rush. "Yuh keep with the bunch. I want to talk to this fella."

"Damn that—"

"Shut up!" snarled the sheriff, wheeling in his saddle with his hand suddenly on the butt of a six-shooter. "Get back with the crowd. Yuh can't bark at me like a dog! I'll shoot both them cow eyes outa yore face, an' let some of that water off yore brain what makes yore head so big!"

CHAPTER THREE

Delayed Funerals

IT WAS a surprise to see Gaspar Dominee go cringing back. His face was contorted as if he was about to burst out in a fit of weeping. He whimpered something as he wheeled his horse

and rode back to the thick half-circle of waiting men.

Hat Hatfield did not so much as glance behind him. He had delivered his ultimatum, and he sat there leaning forward, both hands placed carefully on the horn of his saddle. A slow grin tried to break its way across his face, but his lips were white and trembling. When he spoke his voice was dry and hollow.

"Move back some, brother, an' we'll talk," he ordered. "I think we might have somethin' to say to each other in private. Somethin' strictly between us two."

"Plenty to talk about, maybe," nodded McCrackin. "But yuh ride ahead. Yuh know what I mean, I reckon. I never was no hand to walk in front of some people."

The sheriff frowned, then tried to smile, but he led the way. He was careful when he dismounted fifty yards beyond the end of the wagon. Sliding out of his saddle, he stood there with his thumbs hooked over the belt's buckles. It was a typical gunman's stance, except the sheriff's feet were together, his shoulders loosely slumped in as careless a pose as he could take.

"It ain't gun-play I'm askin'," he snarled when McCrackin halted in front of him. "I know yuh, an' you know me. There ain't a damned bit of love between us. Ain't no use in tryin' to fool ourselves about anything. They want yuh for killin' a couple of men in this country, Bill McCrackin. Once turned over to the law about a hundred miles from here, an' yuh'd hang quick!"

"Yeah, I know," grinned McCrackin, "an' somebody'd pick up a fat reward. I'd be hung for shootin' a rich man's son an' his bodyguard. If truth was known, I might be hung for shootin' about three more who got in my way. But they was all men, instead of two old wimmin in the dead of the night at a farm house. Seems to me the fella who done that for a robbery job was called Purdy Kenny, wasn't he?"

"Yuh needn't throw the past in my face." The sheriff's eyes were blazing in his strained face, his lips curling. "Out here, new leaves are turned over. I'll handle Dominee. Yuh keep yore mouth shut an' handle this crowd yo're with. I'll play soft an' low, but don't try crossin' trails with me. If yuh do I'll kill yuh like a bull-rattlesnake, Bill McCrackin.

"Wait, now." He help up one and. "I ain't goin' to bother yuh an' these folks. That ties yore hands. Yuh can push these cows on through Lost Lode Canyon. There's rich grass an' deep valley country just beyond, but when yuh get there, you'd better stay until shippin' time. I'll see that yuh get out, an' I'll keep my word about not botherin' yuh, but yuh be shore to keep in mind what I said about crossin' trails with me. The minute yuh do yo'll shoot it out with me."

"That wouldn't be hard to do right now." McCrackin was watching him like a cat playing with a mouse. "All yuh got to do, Purdy, is just try to fill yore hand."

"The name's Hat—Hat Hatfield." The sheriff's eyes were like marbles of hot glass. "I don't answer to no other name. Remember that, along with the rest of things it's goin to be good to remember. An' yo're bluffin', Bill, but this time it don't work. Yo're a fast man on the gun-throw, I know.

"Ever'body who knows yuh will say that. Yo've met some slick gun-triggers in yore time. But yuh won't try killin' me over a few words. With me outa the way that outfit behind yuh wouldn't last long enough for hell to scorch a feather. Keep that in mind, too. As long as I'm alive, they live. When I'm dead the wolves close in. Now grin, damn yuh!"

Without waiting for answer, he swung back on his horse. Spurring, he galloped back to his crowd. He pulled rein and said something to Gaspar Dominee at the

outer edge of the horsemen. In a few moments the whole mob was turning to go galloping back toward the head of the valley.

"What was it?" demanded Jensen, coming up wide-eyed and wondering. "Yuh seemed to take all the starch outa that duck as easy as battin' yore eyeballs."

"Temporary speakin'," frowned McCrackin' still staring at the head of the valley, "I was sorter puttin' off a few funerals, both for this crowd an' his crowd. Right now yuh needn't ax a lot of damn fool questions, Bud. We're soon pushin' on, but this time yore Olga's goin' to ride inside a wagon where bullets ain't so apt to get at her. It ain't no picnic we're headin' for this mornin'."

"But—but yuh didn't seem to have no real quarrel with that sheriff fella, Bill?"

"Nope." McCrackin grinned slowly. "I just either put off his funeral or mine, at the same time I was accommodatin' others. But I told yuh not to ax fool questions. Just go get me a plug of tobacco outa yore caddy in the hoodlum. I'm fresh out."

★

BEFORE breaking camp, McCrackin and three of the cowboys rode back to Rambling Creek. During the night an attempt had been made to replace the dam, but the job had been a hasty one, and the stream had again broken through, following its original course down the slopes and out on the arid lands.

"They musta made a long job of it before," explained the tall, dark-haired cowboy by the name of Buck Lee. "It was a slow-down job then to make the creek look to folks along the flats like it was just dryin' up all by itself in the hot spell. Some folks can be mighty smart at mean tricks, Mr. McCrackin."

Roping and dragging out the rest of the logs and rocks in the stream, they rode back to camp. The herd had spread up and down the valley, every cow and horse grazing doggedly. Always the cautious old bird, and never a man to push blindly for greener pastures without actually knowing that those pastures would be greener, McCrackin organized a small scouting party. He sent them out, reserving the most dangerous part of it for himself as he rode alone on Gabriel's Trumpet toward Lost Lode Canyon.

To trust Purdy Kenny—or Hat Hatfield, as he now wanted to be known—would be like poking a man's head in a den of rattlesnakes. Out here Kenny could change his name and call himself anything he wanted to, but that was only the sheep's hide to cover the wolf.

Any man who knew the sheriff's past would not be allowed to slip through his hands alive. Any talk would send the man back to Missouri and straight to the rope they had waiting for him since the night he had broken jail, after killing two aged deputies guarding him for the hanging due to come the next morning.

With the herd bunched only enough to allow the cattle to drift westward with the sun, McCrackin was soon out of sight. Reaching the back of a tall ridge he glimpsed the sheriff and his party in the far distance, crossing a broad valley on their way back to Lost Lode Canyon. It looked all right, as if every man who had come with the sheriff was returning to town with him, but McCrackin was not satisfied with just that.

Leaving Gabriel's Trumpet in a thicket of scrub timber, he scouted along the ridge for more than an hour. A metallic glitter on a faraway peak to the west finally caught his eye, like the silver flash of a tiny mirror reflecting sunlight. To locate its exact hiding spot took several minutes, and then by moving along the ridge he was able to discover a small group of saddled horses concealed on the peak.

"Scouts up there waitin' an' watchin' to see what we're goin' to do," he growled. "Fancy saddles with a lot of silver trimmin's on 'em ain't so hot when it comes to hidin'."

Picking out a way to reach the peak without being seen, he moved back to his horse, and was soon in the saddle. It took almost an hour to get to the place where he again left his horse to move on afoot. Noiselessly in the brush, he worked up the north side of the peak, and finally reached a place where he could hear men talking ahead of him.

"Aces an' eights!" chuckled a voice. "Read 'em an' weep, gents. I ain't afraid of a dead man's hand, yuh see."

Whip on his shoulder, McCrackin eased closer. Carefully parting brush in front of him he saw four men squatting around a blanket spread on the pine needles.

Cards were scattered on the blanket. One man was in the act of raking a pile of money toward him. He was a big, light-haired fellow with a good-natured grin on his face. The man seemed unaware of any danger in the hardened faces of his three companions.

"Yo're a lucky bird, Sandy," growled one of the men, a short, pock-pitted fellow. "Too lucky sometimes, holdin' a full-house like that. We're used to straight poker, not cold decks."

"What the hell yuh mean, Quince?" The light-haired man glanced up. "I didn't deal. . . . Don't—do that, Quince!"

The man's hands and voice jerked at the same time. The hands left the money, lifting, the man's face suddenly white. Hidden by the brush, McCrackin had not yet seen the black .45 that had sneaked suddenly into the pock-pitted man's right hand.

"Yuh winnin' a lot of pots lately, Sandy," the man was growling. "We sorter get tired of it."

"I—I didn't deal, Quince!" The light-haired man's hands were above his head now. "Good God, man, there ain't no call for this! Yuh—yuh dealt me the hand!"

"Don't whine!" ordered Quince in the cold, flat voice of a killer taking his own good time to torment his victim. "Dyin' time comes to all of us, an' yore sign has just been pushed up. Hat's orders. . . . Yeah."

He nodded grimly. "An' I did cold-deck yuh, just as an excuse to upset yuh an' get the drop on yuh to start this thing. Yo're too loose at the jaw-string, Sandy Brown, an' Hat don't like it. A few nights ago yuh was runnin' off at the mouth to that purty singer in the Red Lode Lodge. Yuh was drunk, but it wasn't the first time yo've made threats of what yuh could do to this whole gang if yuh wanted to bust out an' do things.

"Easy now, Sandy." The man cleared his throat with a low, hacking sound. "Yo've got friends among some of the others ridin' for Hat an' Dominee, but none of yore friends are here. It's goin' to be easy enough to tell 'em somebody in that cow-outfit down there shot yuh. That'll keep anybody from gettin' mad at us.

"I reckon," he added after a short, grim pause, "it's decent an' proper to give yuh about a minute to say yore prayers. Start 'em."

"Yuh—yuh can't do this to me, Dude Quince!" The light-haired man was on his feet, eyes bulging, the terror of death written in his face, hands now stretched high above his head. "I—I've played square with yuh fellas! Yuh—yuh know I have! There's another thing yuh better think about, too. Every now an' then Hat or that damn Dominee gives the word for a man to be put outa the picture. Yuh—yuh don't know what time they'll order the same coffin for yuh. None of yuh do! They—they might already have yore death sign hung up!"

"Start yore prayer, cowboy, if yuh aim to start!" snarled Quince. "Hit dirt on

yore knees in the proper sinner's way!"

★

THE pock-pitted man had come to his feet, big Colt in his right hand, uptilted, a grimy thumb hooked over the hammer. McCrackin was trying to ease closer, but he had to move with dreadful slowness. Any quick move would rattle a clump of dead brush in front of him and cause the men to whirl on him.

The butt of an old Colt had already filled his left hand. Cold-blooded murder was about to take place right here in front of him. Even if every one of these men were branded as an enemy he'd not stand for that if he could help it.

"Dirt, I said!" Quince's voice was that of a proud bully showing himself off in front of the other white-faced men. "Killin' a man is about one of the easiest things I do. Hat Hatfield's been square to me, an' when yuh run off at the mouth about what yuh can do to Hat, then that means yuh think yuh can do the same thing to me. That goes for Hunker Slade an' Wince Bullard, my pards here. I—Damn!"

The vicious report of a shot rolled around the top of the peak. The long Colt in Dude Quince's hand had fired from a sudden, unexpected shock, but it had swung unexpectedly to the right.

It was exactly as if a glistening blacksnake had shot forward to seize it and give it a jerk. It was that whip, brought into action at the blink of an eye, and now McCrackin's voice came, laden with cold death.

"Stand!" he ordered, covering them with the six-shooter in his left hand, the whip in his right as he pushed forward. "Ary man who goes for a gun will drop dead in his tracks!"

A man dropped. It was Sandy Brown. As if every bone and muscle in his body had suddenly given way, he came down in a white-faced, dead-faint flop. Dude Quince's six-shooter had already left his hand, flipped away by that one lightning strike and jerk of the whip. White-faced himself, hands automatically lifting, he turned as the other two men stumbled to their feet with their hands in the air.

"It looks," growled McCrackin, "like yore victim's outa the picture for the minute. One at a time, yuh unbuckle yore gunbelts an' let 'em drop. *Mind yore hands!* When I kill a man I don't torment 'im—I just blast 'im. I ain't like yuh, Mr. Quine. I don't gloat over a cold-deck, sure-thing bet. That's right!"

He grinned when he saw that Quince's belts were the first to drop. "Yuh mind well, don't yuh? An' that's good of yuh boys, too." He nodded when the belts of Hunker Slade and Wince Bullard hit the ground. "Just kick 'em for'ard."

"What—what the hell yuh aim to do?" whimpered Quince when McCrackin picked up each six-shooter, removed the cylinder and sent it flying to lose itself in the brush. "Yuh—yuh're as good as robbin' us, fella!"

"That all?" McCracken glowered at him. "Well, maybe so, but guns ain't to be trusted in the hands of children an' fools. Turn 'round an' bend over—all of yuh!"

The furious stroke of a knife would not have hurt them more a moment later. Bent over with their backs to him, the long whip tore forward. It bursted the skin-tight seat of Dude Quince's trousers and laid the skin bare in a sudden, blood-sprinkling streak.

As if lifted on the toe of a giant boot, Quince sprang forward with the squall of a terrified wildcat. In a lighting dash he was gone, a madman pawing and smashing through the brush down the slope as if the devil himself was scratching right at his flying heels.

Hunker Slade and Wince Bullard followed the man in their turn, each with a furious wildcat squall and the seat of his

trousers split wide-open as if a terrible knife had slashed them. In fear- and pain-crazed fit of yelling and cursing they plunged away to eastward. They stumbled and fell, and cursed in rasping voices, but they got up each time to keep going as if they were in too big a hurry even to think about bothering with the horses they had left behind.

McCrackin stood there watching the light-haired man. Sandy Brown had returned to consciousness and was lying there looking at him owlishly.

"The next time," growled McCrackin, "that yuh hold aces an' eights, fella, yuh better shoot first. An' then hold 'em!"

CHAPTER FOUR

Into the Death-Trap!

THERE was not a thing to worry about—not a thing! Hat Hatfield reassured himself of that happy fact no less than twenty times as he finally rode back to Lost Lode Canyon with the wondering and disgruntled Gaspar Dominee beside him. Most of his men were strung out in a slow, wondering poke a half-mile behind him. Bill McCrackin must die, and that was all there was to it.

Yet, the more the sheriff thought of it, the more desperately important it became. Once he caught himself mumbling aloud and cursing for not having shot it out with the man the moment he recognized him. Bill McCrackin *could* be beaten on the draw. Hell, the man didn't live who could not be beaten.

"My chance was there!" snarled the sheriff. "I passed it up!"

"This is the first time I've ever seen you scared, Hat." Dominee was watching him from his right. "Why, the way you've been stalling a man would think you're afraid to go back to town! Who is that man with the bullwhip? What does he have on you?"

"Not a thing!" snapped the sheriff. "Not a damned thing!"

"You can tell that to the thick-heads behind us," frowned Dominee, "but you can't tell me, Hat. You were ready to murder me back there. I saw it in your eyes. Others saw it, and I don't like it."

"Keep yore mouth shut!" ordered the sheriff. "We'll probably talk over a lot of things later on. Yo've never had me fail on job before, have yuh? Naw, yuh ain't, an' yuh won't. If I had to bully yuh a little, it was for a good cause. But what's done is done, an' I'm one man yuh can't scare, Dominee. Yo've got a lot on me, but I've got a lot on yuh at the same time."

They rode on in an ugly silence, but Hatfield's thoughts were busy.

For years Missouri had been in his background, as good as forgotten and only to be remembered with a pang of pain such as the exposed nerve of a tooth might send gouging through a man who unthinkingly tosses a cold swallow of water into his mouth. And now had come that damned Bullwhip Bill McCrackin, one man he'd never be able to buy off; the one man who could point his finger at him and say, "Hang, damn yuh, hang!"

It was self-defense for one to shoot a man like that, the sheriff assured himself. Absolutely self-defense! He was worse than a man who came at another with a blazing gun or a flashing knife. Then there was no agony of waiting, no sleepless nights, with a man tumbling and tossing on his bed or walking the floor, thoughts straining to the sound of the wind or the squeak of every board. A man planting his ear to the door or window to listen and weigh the ring of every distant hoof.

Mr. Hat Hatfield had done well in Lost Lode Canyon country. Deep here in the mountains, locked in by the great walls of hills and the dark stands of timber, it had been an ideal spot from the beginning.

He had left Missouri with money—and

they'd never found *that!* It had been in a safe hole, waiting for his hand, the night he had escaped.

Thirteen thousand, eight hundred dollars in good gold for which two weak-minded old women had no more use than to keep it out of circulation in a hole under the meal-barrel in the kitchen. People like that had no business with money!

Gaspar Dominee had been a man to tie up with. In a few years they had amassed fortunes. Land, timber, mineral, water rights and cattle belonged to them in any direction a bird could fly. Men on the run came here, worked their heads off for a song to receive the protection of the Dominee-Hatfield combine. In a matter of a few years that combine had found itself casting the winning votes for its own political clique—typical politicians who would do as they were told as long as the votes came their way. Only one thing could mar this set-up. That was Bullwhip Bill McCrackin!

★

WHEN they reached town the sheriff was still sulking. It was a nice place here, with the walls of the town at either side and the new jail at the other end of it.

They passed the Red Lode Lodge on their left, the Mountain King Bar on the right. At a wave of his hand, Hatfield signaled the crowd behind him to turn in at the hitchracks along the street and enter the saloons where they could wet up their whistles with a few drinks. He rode on to the jail with Dominee beside him and still keeping quiet. In the office of the jail he banged down behind his enormous desk in the center of the room and poured himself three huge drinks, one after the other.

"You're scared, Hat." Dominee was staring at him from the other side of the desk. Beads of perspiration were beginning to stand out on his huge, round head. "I've never seen you like this. You scare me, acting this way! Come out with it. What the devil has that man with the whip got on you?"

"I've told yuh nothin'!" snarled the sheriff. Nobody's got anything on me, not even yuh!" He pawed the bottle and his glass to him again. "I could hang yuh tomorrow if I wanted to. I don't play with a man without havin' it on 'im. I don't let no man have somethin' on me where he can hold my feet to the fire!"

"But—but this man *is* holding your feet to the fire, Hat. Wait!" Dominee jerked up a big hand. "Watch your temper, man. Don't fly all over me. But—but you're *scared.* The first time I ever saw you afraid of anything, and—wait, *wait!*"

Again the hand came up. "There can't be anything we can't handle. We have forty men in our pay. Our word is the law none can escape. We own this part of the country. We rule it. We— What are you looking at? What—what are you staring at?"

Back out of his chair in a crouch, Dominee was suddenly on his feet. Hatfield was glaring across the desk, face as yellow as old parchment, eyes wild in their sockets. It took a second for Dominee to see that the man was looking past him, on out the window and along the street to the east end of it where a rider was just thundering around a bend at a furious pace, a trail of dust streaking up behind him.

"It's Dude Quince!" The sheriff's voice was a startled croak. *"Now* what is the matter?"

Quince was a dramatic man. With people rushing to the doorways of saloons to stare at him as he thundered on up the street at his furious pace, he came on, halting in a cloud of dust at the hitchrack and throwing himself out of his saddle.

Empty holsters at his hips dangling, he came banging into the office of the jail with the seat of his trousers gaping, the blood still dripping. After gulping down a

drink he was snarling out the story of his embarrassing defeat.

"An' that's the way it happened," he finished. "Look at what he done with that damn blacksnake whip!" He turned for the two amazed men to look. "Split wide open, an' Hunker Slade an' Wince Bullard ain't much better, though they yell more. I was just ready to squeeze trigger on Brown when that whip popped on my gun. I had to run when he told us to run, but I sneaked back an' got my hoss, an' here I am. Slade an' Bullard are out there. The last I saw of 'em they was settin' in the muddy edge of a water hole tryin' to take the fire outa their britches. . . . What's left of 'em, that is."

"Where's that damned McCrackin?" snarled the sheriff. "I—I mean that fella with that whip?"

"The last time I looked back from a high ridge," Quince was reaching for the bottle again, "him an' Sandy Brown was ridin' right on toward town as friendly as yuh please. Do yuh think that fella'll really have guts enough to come right on in on us?"

"Sure!" A mirthless, sickly grin sawed its way across the sheriff's face as he arose to unbuckle his heavy belts and drop them into a lower drawer of the desk. From another drawer, with both men staring at him, he removed a pair of double-barreled Derringers to thrust them into the front pockets of his trousers.

"That bird's got nerve enough for anything. Yuh an' the rest of the boys take care of Sandy Brown. I'll handle the bullwhip fella. He'll have less than five minutes to live, once his foot touches ground in my town. Yuh get somewhere with a good Winchester or a shotgun, Dominee. I think that upper front room of the Red Lode Lodge will be the best an' most effective place for yuh.

"There's just one thing to remember: Don't miss when yuh shoot!—an', for Lord's sake, shoot often!"

THE town was always quiet before a gun-storm, and it remained that way. One noticed only that horses along the street disappeared gradually until only a few worthless old plugs stood dozing at the hitchracks. But Lost Lode Canyon was ready.

Picked men had moved among the gunmen. Orders had been given in quiet voices. The preparation for a funeral could not have been more solemn and respectful from all outward appearances.

Hat Hatfield visited all the places. Gaspar Dominee had gone into the Red Lode Lodge, and had quietly disappeared. In times of great stress he was a man who could become as calm as a mountain lake. If he spoke to a man he was hellishly polite. Sheriff Hatfield alone seemed grim, and he grew grimmer as the time dragged.

Scouts drifted in, but they came in quietly and with no sign of excitement as they made it a point to hitch their horses bethind the saloons. Hunker Slade and Wince Bullard finally appeared behind the Red Lode Lodge. They took time out to sneak upstairs and change their trousers and rearm, and then came down to mingle with the crowd at the bar where no one was talking about what was going to happen.

The B Bar 5 was coming!

The man with the whip had dropped back to join with Brown who was apparently trying to hide himself with the herd. Hatfield had no way of knowing how much Brown had told McCrackin, but he could bet in his own mind that it was enough.

Now Brown would try to sneak through with the herd as protection and wait for his chance to escape the country when better opportunity afforded in the wilds beyond Lost Lode Canyon.

Waiting for the kill was the worst. It was not until after four o'clock that the herd was sighted an hour's drive east of town.

Hatfield kept walking up and down the street. He had enemies enough here, and his stalking about without his six-shooters was a perfect invite for trouble. But he was not afraid of that. There was something else.

Men who hated him because he had robbed many of them, had better sense than to try to start anything if he had walked down the street blazing naked.

Hatfield kept taking a drink here and there. That was all right for himself, but when he slipped upstairs in the Red Lode Lodge and found Gaspar Dominee nibbling at a bottle near the window of the front room he gave the man a cursing for drinking, and then wound up by taking a drink with him. That way, Dominee wouldn't get enough to spoil his aim. And besides, Hatfield thought, he needed the liquor more.

"The man with that whip is first," he warned. "I'd like to do that job myself. The satisfaction would go with me through the rest of my life but yuh have a shotgun, two of 'em," he glanced at a second long weapon standing in the corner, "an' enough buckshot to stop a whole army. Get 'im, if the chance comes yore way. That order's been passed to all hands."

He started back down into the great room below, but when he reached the head of the stairs a wild burst of excitement halted him. He stiffened in his tracks, eyes widening, mouth flying open with surprise at the sudden din. Yells and screams had filled the great barroom and gambling hall below.

The spontaneous rush of feet came like an explosion. Hatfield staggered as if from a blow when he heard the swinging blinds of the front door being torn off and the windows being kicked or knocked out with chairs as the crowd poured for the street in a fighting mass.

"Dynamite!" bawled a voice. *"Dynamite! Run for yore life!"*

McCrackin thought that he was standing alone in the place within twenty seconds after he had hurled his dummy through the back door. Sandy Brown had given him a clear picture of Lost Lode, and McCrackin had left the herd at the last minute, making a fast swing-around in the timber to come up on the Red Lode Lodge from behind. It had been no trouble to ease his horse in among the others behind the building. Armed with three yellow tubes of wrapping paper filled with sand and tied together with a strip of harmless blasting fuse, it had taken no time at all to slip to the back door. There he had lighted his fuse, and with a quick throw had sent it flying inside to create a sudden stampede.

Six-shooter in each hand and bullwhip ready on his shoulder, he now flipped into the room and side-stepped quickly to the wall to his right. The room had been deserted as if a cyclone had struck it, and the mob that had torn out the front door and windows had gone on across the street.

Tables and chairs were upset and splintered to wreckage. Somebody had knocked over the old stove, filling the room with soot. Drinks and bottles on the bar were upset and spilling. The harmless fuse was still burning there on the floor, sending up its streak of smoke, and McCrackin had his chance to take stock of the great room while he waited.

It was like blundering into a museum. Guns and all manner of riding gear hung on the walls. The ceiling was strung with it. He noticed a pair of boots and spurs hanging here and there, signs of some cowboy's hard luck in a gambling game that had sent him on his way bare of purse as well as of feet.

Above his head, out of reach, he saw a set of false teeth hanging on a string. Thoughts of a man being fool enough to lose his store-bought teeth in a gambling game was enough to make him grin. . . .

Then a board squeaked at the head of the stairs against the wall. Instantly, McCrackin was on his guard.

A quick, violent ring of spurred heels now sounded on the stairs. Holstering the six-shooter in his right hand McCrackin took down his whip. To his surprise he saw the sheriff rushing down to the dark landing giving onto a small balcony on the stairs.

"The damn fools!" cried the man, glaring at the gone-out fuse and the tubes of sand below him on the floor. "That thing's a fake!"

"That's a fact, Purdy." McCrackin's voice lifted like a ghost voice from the blob of heavy shadow against the wall. "It don't take much to scare folks when they're on needles an' pins. I remember once that a gun popped outside the court house back in Missouri when they was tryin' yuh, an' yuh keeled outa yore chair in a dead-faint."

"Don't turn 'round!" The voice jarred from the rear doorway. "We've got yuh, if Hat ain't! That rush didn't fool us. We just ducked around the back way."

McCrackin turned his head and glanced over the point of his shoulder. Dude Quince was behind him. A gleaming black six-shooter was in the man's right hand, and his left hand was holding it by the long barrel to steady the weapon and make him certain of his kill. Then, backed by a low chuckle from the rear window beyond Quince, McCrackin saw the sneering faces of Hunker Slade and Wince Bullard leering at him over the barrels of their six-shooters.

"Don't wait, fools!" The sheriff's voice was a wail on the stairs. "Blast 'im down!"

But as the man spoke, McCrackin was leaping back to a closed door he had noticed in the wall. In the blazing gunfire he got to it, his own roaring guns adding their din to the confusion. He struck the door with his shoulder. It opened, but as it opened and McCrackin stumbled backward into a stout-planked side room a big bartender behind him brought a heavy stool crashing down on his head.

McCrackin went on backward and down, dazed for the moment but remembering that he had seen one of the bartenders rush for this room in the stampede. Six-shooters slithering out of his hands, he started to come up as the wreckage of the stool again came crashing down on his head. He gripped with the bartender then, but as McCrackin seized him the man was falling, caught heart-high by a bullet from the blazing six-shooters roaring their fury blindly through the gunsmoke.

There was just time enough to hurl the dying bartender to one side and kick the door closed. It was a door filled with flying splinters as the bullets tore through it, but it was stout enough to hold for a time as McCrackin threw a heavy latch in place and scooped to the floor to pick up his six-shooters.

It was that scoop that saved him. As he swung downward, blazing gunfire licked through a narrow, iron-barred window in the rear wall of the room. He stabbed two gashes of flame at the window as he swerved up, leaping for the wall. Through the bursting smoke and the gashing of flame he saw Dude Quince reel back with blood flying from his face as he plunged to the ground beyond the window.

"Yore guns won't shoot yuh outa this, McCrackin!" The sheriff's voice snarled at him with a quick silence that followed a sudden let-up in gunfire. "Yo're as good as dead an' nailed in a box!"

★

McCRACKIN had darted on to the window to slam a wooden shutter closed, but light was still streaming into the room. It was then that he saw the narrow skylight overhead. The

skylight was open. A shadow thrown by the lowering sun was bobbing about up there, showing that the sheriff had stepped out of a side window to the roof.

Shots were drilling through the pine planks over the window behind McCrackin by this time. Soon he could hear rifles and shotguns opening up behind the Red Lode. Bullets and buckshot started gouging their way through the cracks in the wall. A man could not stay here long, for the rear wall of the room was riddled.

Into that noise came another. Oaths and yells were filling the street in front of the Red Lode, mingled with the bawling of cattle. The B Bar 5 was roaring into town. Shotguns, rifles and six-shooters were opening up on the cattle and the cowboys. If those cattle were turned back everything would be lost. A man *had* to get out of here!

Ignoring the taunting voice of the sheriff above him, McCrackin upset a heavy table. Keeping the table on its side and dragging it along for what protection it might give him, he crawled back to the door. As he reached it a hand was thrust down through the skylight. A wicked little derringer blazed blindly at him with the owner of the weapon keeping all of himself concealed except for the hand and the long arm holding the gun.

It was McCrackin's one chance. His whip shot forward and upward. Its wicked rawhide lash wrapped itself around the sheriff's wrist just as the hand was jerking upward. An oath of alarm came then. As if snaked forward and dragged through the skylight by a streak of black lightning, the man came down, plummeting headfirst for the floor. The arms and legs quivered like the legs of a dying spider, then heeled over, growing limp on the floor.

"Sorter like yuh shot them two old wimmin, ain't it?" growled McCrackin, snaking his whip back to him. "Only yuh shot 'em in the back when they was fixin' some supper for yuh to eat."

He whirled back to the door as he saw other shadows taking place up there on the

The B Bar 5 was roaring into town.

roof. For some reason the shots being poured into the door had suddenly let up with yells and curses lifting behind the Red Lode. McCrackin lifted the latch to crack open the door, and was almost knocked off his feet when a big, white-faced red steer came plunging into the room.

The great barroom was being filled and jammed with cattle. Faced with terrific gunfire and going mad from the smell of blood as steers were being shot down in the streets, they had turned into any opening in front of them. In the back door others were pouring in, making a milling sea in the room with those from the front door and showing that the herd had been split in all directions.

A lowered head gave McCrackin his first boost. It was like a man stepping upon the cowcatcher of a locomotive. McCrackin's left foot jammed down on the head as a big steer plowed toward him. He was lifted, hurled upward, and came down on the animal's back to go swinging and leaping on. He was like a man dancing from wave to wave on a sloping and heaving ocean as he reached the stairs. The railing was being ripped off from below as he swung over it and threw himself on the landing.

An open window was to his right. Looking out on the roof of the stout little room he had left below he saw four gunmen crouching around the skylight. A sudden blazing of his guns took them by surprise. As scared bullfrogs might leave the bank of a pool for the water, they threw themselves over the lip of the roof and into what seemed certain destruction in the swarming cattle below.

For it was a madhouse back there behind the Red Lode Lodge by this time. Horses standing tied to hitchracks in the rear walls of the buildings could not stand in the face of all those lowered horns. They were rearing back, breaking their reins and bridles, and in the mob of brutes was old Gabriel's Trumpet, bridle broken, his tail and head in the air as he dashed off with the others.

With gunfire shaking the front of the building, McCrackin moved on up the stairs. Cattle were behind him, themselves being pressed up the stairs from the jamming and horning below, and as he turned a bend in the hall he saw Dominee through an open doorway.

Dominee was bouncing back and forth in front of the window like a monkey on a stick. A shotgun in his hand was roaring. As he broke it to reload, McCrackin's whip streaked out, making the noise of a .45 as the lash struck the man's neck.

Gaspar Dominee whirled, shotgun suddenly hugged to his belly with one hand while the other slapped to the back of his neck, he staggered backward into the open window, big eyes walling, mouth open for a bawl of surprise and terror that never came. A small rug slipped under his feet.

He went on backward, out the window and down head-first, shotgun still hugged to his belly. A spurred heel caught him, holding him for just a second before the boot slipped off to free his foot and allow him to go flopping on down into the fighting-mad cattle below.

McCrackin caught just one glimpse of him down there as the cattle closed over him, then he found Gaspar Dominee's second shotgun and a dozen opened boxes of shells standing on a table near the window. A glimpse across the street to lower roofs showed him what was happening there. A mob of men on top of buildings were still blazing down at the cattle in a ruthless slaughtering. He opened fire with the shotgun, letting go a double-barreled rake of buckshot that threw the mob on one roof into confusion and sent men leaping and scattering to other nearby roofs.

It did not take long for the rest of it. It was as though Gaspar Dominee had taken pains to leave an abundant supply of shells right there waiting for him. He reloaded,

blazed away again, and ducked to reload as six-shooter bullets raked the window from the screeching and cursing mobs across the street.

But even if he did hold the advantage here, he could not stay when he heard cattle jamming into the hall behind him. He loaded himself with all the shells he could carry and moved back to where he had seen a wall ladder going to a skylight in the roof. Once on the roof of the Red Lode Lodge he had it all in his favor.

Everything was below him up here. He raked one roof clean, and then saw a murderous fire opening up on another from a knoll down the canyon. Bud Jensen, his daughter and other riders of the B Bar 5 were taking a hand in it. From their point of vantage and his own on the Red Lodge, the people on the roofs up and down the street were trapped. They could not go down. Cattle had them trapped in that direction and would only trample them to death the moment their feet touched the ground. In a few minutes handkerchiefs were fluttering. Men were throwing down their weapons and lifting their hands.

"Stop it!" "Stop it!" Those cries surged up from every roof. "Dammit, yuh can't keep on killin' us with our hands up!"

"Throw yore fightin' tools in the street!" bawled McCrackin, letting go another double-barreled charge. "Yuh started this thing, didn't yuh? We didn't ax for it!"

But in spite of all resistance being shattered it took almost an hour for it to end. With men disarmed and standing on the roofs, hands lifted and their weapons thrown in the street, the B Bar 5 came easing on into the picture. Cowboys drove the cattle out of the saloons and buildings and

(Concluded on page 145)

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

FOR DEFENSE

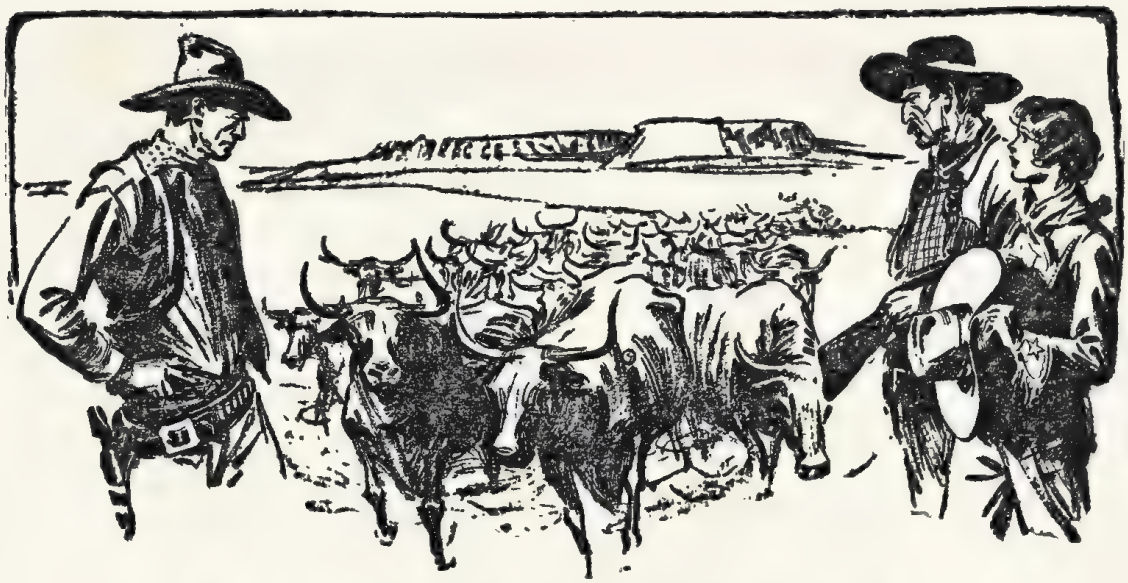
★

BUY A SHARE IN AMERICA

The new United States Defense Savings Bonds and Stamps give all of us a way to take a direct part in building the defenses of our country.

This is the American way to provide the billions needed so urgently for National Defense.

UNITED STATES DEFENSE SAVINGS BONDS and STAMPS



Up the Trail

WE'RE going to do a little bugle-blowing in this space, and if you think that such a sound isn't a part of the frontier tradition, we'll lay you odds that it is! For it looks—as many men who undoubtedly know the facts have told us—that we have a job to do. A tough job, and one which we can't get through in a hurry.

Perhaps at no time in our history have we faced such odds as every one of us faces today. Even granting the strength of our allies, the years of preparation of the enemy powers, their undoubted ability in the field of action and—most of all—their resources and supply of materials is nothing that anyone who is honest with himself can laugh off.

Yet, from the buckskin-clad mountainmen through the longhorn cattle ranchers and tough-fisted hard-rock miners down to the very moment we write this, Westerners have never been greatly bothered about battling against odds. That personal courage was born of the rough-shod individualism of those who had the guts to strike out alone and conquer a hostile and unknown land. And it is nowhere better expressed than in that immortal fight at the Alamo.

There, surrounded by an overpowering force of Mexican soldiers, Col. Travis drew with his sword the historic line on the parched earth, which meant fighting to the death for all those who stepped across it, and probable safety for those who did not. We like to think of that hero, wasted in illness and too weak to move, who was asked to be carried across that line, so that he might die with his friends.

Nor can we forget that handful of unkempt and ragged buffalo hunters, a few merchants and a woman at Adobe Walls, when they successfully stood off charge after charge of bloodthirsty savages who outnumbered them more than ten to one. Again, there are the thrilling tales of courage during the Indian campaigns wherein such names as Crook, Miles, Howard, Custer and half a dozen more—along with valiant scouts—achieved their measure of immortality in the history of our country.

We recall especially that a once-frail Easterner, who determined that the West offered him—by hard and dangerous living—a chance to become sound and robust, didn't raise his own regiment back in New York. Teddy Roosevelt knew well the calibre of the men he'd worked with, hunted with and ridden range with. So he returned West to recruit his famous Rough Riders, who—by the way—did most of their fighting on foot. But it was, as history attested, no ineffectual job!

We don't know if the Marine sergeant who, when the zero hour came during the last war, heaved himself over the top of his trench, shouting, "Come on, you lugs

—Do you want to live forever?" came from the West or not. But we do know that his courage and superb fighting spirit was one and the same with the finest tradition of the frontier. We do know, of course, that Sergeant York came from Tennessee—which sent its bountiful share of hard-fighting and equally hard-praying men and women out to the wilderness.

And today we're getting letters from the Westerners who write our stories that many of them are enlisting. Others do double duty working in aircraft plants or at other defense work, and keep on turning in their colorful novels of the country and the men they know and love.

Well, maybe we can't all have the glory, but there's a job for each of us in this struggle to save our way of life and our freedom. In this war, where supplies and mechanical equipment play such a major role that it takes almost ten working men to maintain every one man who's in the front line, we all have our work cut out for us. And vitally important work it is.

Apropos of that, we're printing here, at request of the Social Security Board, some information that might help some of us do their share.

Facilities of the United States Employment Service, by arrangement with the United States Maritime Commission, will be used to speed the manning of ships for America's expanding merchant marine, according to Federal Security Administrator Paul V. McNutt. Public employment offices in every State will assist in the enrollment of apprentice seaman and radio operators for training by the Maritime Service which is administered for the Maritime Commission by the U. S. Coast Guard. Apprentices are paid while in training. Upon completion of this free training course, they are expected to serve in the merchant marine for at least a year thereafter.

"Some twelve hundred new merchant ships will be launched during the next two years and will require forty thousand additional seamen in deck and engine departments, as radio operators, and as cooks and bakers," said Mr. McNutt. "Young men are needed at once, and those accepted for training are assured of good jobs at unusually good pay because there is a lack of trained men to man these new vessels.

"Young men between the ages of eighteen and twenty-three are urged to apply at their local State employment office. They will have to meet physical and character standards established by the Maritime Service. Though the Maritime Service is not an enlisted service, Selective Service boards have instructions to waive induction, where possible, of men in the merchant marine. Apprentices may join the Merchant Marine Reserve of the U. S. Navy Reserve and thus be exempt from selective service."

Mr. McNutt said he had been informed that trainees will receive free transportation from the point of enrollment to the school. A clothing allowance will be furnished amounting to $100. Trainees will receive quarters, subsistence, and free medical and dental care.

On completion of the course, free transportation will be furnished to assigned ports. In addition, men in the deck, engineering, and cooks' and bakers' schools receive a minimum of $21 a month, and those in the radio school from $36 to $54 monthly.

Base pay for graduates employed on ocean and Great Lakes ships is $72.50 per month for ordinary seamen and engine room helpers, and $92.50 for able seamen and qualified members of the engine department, plus bonuses. Base pay plus bonuses, in almost all cases, will amount to more than $200 a month. Cooks and bakers receive about the same pay; radio operators' pay runs higher.

The local State employment offices, Mr. McNutt said, will give information and preliminary interviews to applicants, then refer them to Maritime Service enrollment officers with headquarters in forty inland and coastal cities.

No one who is sane wants war. But when we find the battle forced upon us, we will prove that, though the frontier may have largely disappeared, the spirit that tamed it has not.

And that spirit of men who are unafraid to brave death along the out-trails, whether in raw, raucous end-of-steel towns, on the dusty longhorn trail, in the dangerous up-and-down cattle country, will be eloquent in the novels for the next issue.

For example, among other stories, that long-faced wizard with both card-deck and six-shooter, Nero Jones, will return in the May issue, in a powerful saga by Robert E. Mahaffay. Tom Roan will also make an encore with a stirring novel of three hell-bending fugitives. . . . And in Dee Linford's story of Sudden John Irons, we find that cryptic old range detective playing an unexpected part in getting—"Powder and Ball for General Crook!"

The May issue will be published April 3rd!

(Continued from page 8)

time. . . . What do *you* think about it? Come on, you gun-fans; let's augur!

★

WHICH suggests another subject for augurment. Recently I spent a few hours with a chap who was raised in the old West, and who was the son of an United States marshal in Colorado, in the Seventies. After that he was successively an agent for a cattlemen's protective association in Texas and Arizona, a Pinkerton detective in several states, and, finally, a sheriff in Colorado for eight years. My friend's name is Chatfield Taylor Vernon, of San Francisco. During the first World War he was an officer in the Rainbow Division, in France.

In the early days, Vernon told me, a gunman was one who fought it out with a gun—a revolver. They weren't yellow-livered alley rats, or hoodlums. They had steel in their backbones and iron in their blood. Unquestionably some of them were criminals. But they fought it out with armed men, who would have killed them if they could. They didn't use bombs, or machine guns, or wear so-called bullet-proof vests.

It occurs to me frequently to wonder what would happen if those old-timers could be young men again; members of the police force in some metropolitan city. Just what would happen in that event to some of the black-hearted mobsters who have neither the guts nor the manhood to fight it out square and even . . . I wonder!

My friend Vernon told me some things about old-time gunmen which you might like to have me pass on. He is not an iconoclast, exactly, but he does insist that the American public, as P. T. Barnum once said, "loves to be bunked!" For instance, what man who has attained the age of twenty-one doesn't believe Wild Bill Hickok was one of the greatest of the old-time killers in the West—fighting always on the side of law and order? All of us have heard or read the thrilling story of how Wild Bill "heroically defended Wells Fargo Express Company property against the terrible McCandles gang, during which fierce fight the much-touted Jayhawker—he was raised in Decatur County, Kansas, a few miles from the town of Oberlin—shot down six of the dastardly bandits, with six shots! Then he captured a seventh bandit with his naked hands and tied him up with a lariat."

As a cold matter of historical fact, Wild Bill didn't do any such thing! He was not an express agent, as the publicity agents wrote of him. He was a stable-hand for stage horses belonging to the Wells Fargo Express Company. He and another man named Tom Wellman shot down three men in cold blood—from behind, using .44 Colts, from a distance of less than six feet. Calamity Jane herself, who knew Bill Hickok fairly well, never did think he was much. Not *too* much.

Then there was the famous Buffalo Bill. Another killer extraordinary of the old days. I remember a story of *his* prowess with a gun which, perhaps, has been told, and retold, as many times as any other tale of the great buffalo hunter's thrilling experiences.

In fact, I heard Col. Cody himself tell this story during the Columbian Exposition in Chicago, in 1893, when he and Annie Oakley were breaking glass balls from horseback with .32 rifles loaded with bird-shot.

It seems there was an Indian chief called Yellow Hand. He was bad. So bad that one day he had to be killed by a pale-face, assisted by two other pale-faces who fought it out with Yellow Hand with Bowies and sixguns.

Shortly after that, a sensational dime novel writer of the period, named Ned Buntline, wrote a story called "All About

My Terrible Duel With Yellow Hand," and signed by Buffalo Bill.

Chat Vernon's father was there at the time, along with several others. They reported under oath to the United States Government that not only with the valiant William F. Cody not among those present, but he never did arrive at the scene until the following day, when Yellow Hand's body had been buried.

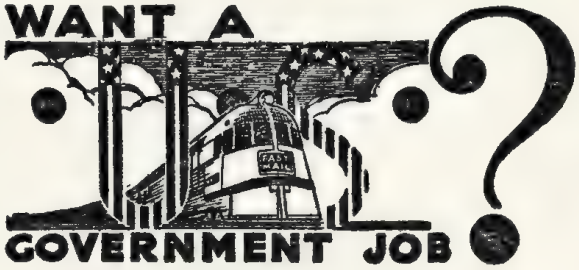
Some of the gunmen of the West grew mighty tall, at the expense of others, who were often the real heroes. There are those of us—and among them, many readers of this magazine—who would like to see portrayed accurately some of the great characters of the Old West.

★

THOSE gunmen of yesteryear: Who were they? Where did they come from? Lineal descendants they were of the individualistic pioneers of the leather-stocking days. The wild blood of Boone, and Kenton and Girty, flowed in their veins. Men they were, whose existence seems to have been more than necessary if the West was to become civilized, as, for instance, the brave men who made up the famous Twentieth Kansas, the First Tennessee, the First Nebraska, Thirteenth Minnesota, Second Oregon, First Montana, First Washington, First California, and all the rest of those now white-haired old veterans who took the Philippines from the Spaniards, and taught the natives there what it really means to live under a flag that symbolizes *libertad!*

For a composite character to be designated as the "old-time gunman of the West" we might draw upon the slums of New York City, the bottoms along the Ohio River all the way from Pittsburgh to the Mississippi, Iowa and Indiana farms. We might draw on almost every section of the United States.

SAVE UP TO 50% FACTORY-TO-YOU
PUSH-BUTTON TUNING
9 BANDS (ON 6 DIAL SCALES)
20 TIMES EASIER FOREIGN TUNING with SUPER BAND SPREAD RADIO!
PUT THIS CHASSIS IN YOUR PRESENT CABINET
UP TO $50.00 TRADE-IN
$19.75 COMPLETE
with SPEAKER, TUBES, PUSH-BUTTON TUNING, MAGNA TENNA LOOP AERIAL, READY TO PLAY
THINK of it . . . 20 times easier to tune . . . 10 times more sensitive than ordinary radios! Crystal-Clear High Fidelity Tone. Famous 30-day trial plan fully protects you and enables you to prove Midwest's amazing new 1942 Super Spread Band performance in your own home, without obligation. Write today. Your name on a 1¢ postal card will do. Send for big FREE 1942 Catalog, showing Radios, Radio-Phones, Home Recorders — from $12.95 to $212.50.
9 BAND CONSOLE $43.95 COMPLETE
30 DAYS TRIAL
E-Z TERMS
UP TO 16 TUBES
USER AGENTS WANTED
MIDWEST RADIO CORPORATION
DEPT. 98-G CINCINNATI, OHIO



START

$1260 to $2100 YEAR

MEN—WOMEN

Postoffice Clerks-Carriers
Railway Postal Clerks
Stenographers
Accountants
Statistical Clerks
Typists
Student Nurses
Many Other Jobs

PREPARE IMMEDIATELY

MAIL COUPON TODAY SURE

COUPON

Franklin Institute
Dept. H175
ROCHESTER, N. Y.

Gentlemen: Rush to me, FREE of charge, list of U.S. Government big pay jobs. Send FREE 32-page book describing salaries, vacations, hours, work, etc. Tell me how to qualify for one of these jobs.

Name.....

Address.....

Getting Up Nights

If you suffer from Getting Up Nights, Backache, Nervousness, Leg Pains, Swollen Ankles and feel worn out, due to non-organic and non-systemic Kidney and Bladder troubles, you should try Cystex which is giving joyous help to thousands. Printed guarantee. Money back unless completely satisfactory. Ask your druggist for Cystex today. Only 35c.

FALSE TEETH AS LOW AS $7.95

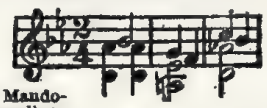
Per Plate. DENTAL PLATES are made in our own laboratory from your personal impression. Our workmanship and material GUARANTEED or purchase price refunded. We take this risk on our 60-day trial offer. DO NOT SEND ANY MONEY! MAIL POST CARD for FREE Material and Catalog of our LOW PRICES. DON'T PUT IT OFF—Write us TODAY!

BRIGHTON-THOMAS DENTAL LABORATORY
Dept. 1106 6217 S. Halsted Street, Chicago, Ill.

POEMS WANTED FOR MUSICAL SETTING

Mother, Home, Love, Sacred, Patriotic, Comic or any subject. Don't delay—send us your original poem at once for our offer and FREE Rhyming Dictionary.
RICHARD BROTHERS, 30-A Woods Building, Chicago, Illinois.

LEARN



Piano, Violin, Cornet, Trumpet, Mandolin, Guitar, Banjo, Organ, Accordion. Saxophone, Clarinet. SIMPLIFIED HOME STUDY METHOD—conservatory grade. Successfully tried courses for beginners. ATTRACTIVELY PRICED—Convenient payment plan. Free catalog. If Juvenile, parent's signature must accompany inquiry.

NATIONAL ACADEMY OF MUSIC
Dept. 158-N 1525 East 53rd St., Chicago, Ill.

WE MATCH PANTS ToAnySuit!

Double the life of your coat and vest with correctly matched pants. 100,000 patterns. Every pair hand tailored to your measure. Our match sent FREE for your O. K. before pants are made. Fit guaranteed. Send piece of cloth or vest today.

SUPERIOR MATCH PANTS COMPANY
209 S. State St. Dept. 353, Chicago

New MIRACLE WALL CLEANER

AGENTS HOT SELLER! "Erases" dirt like magic—walls, ceilings, window shades, upholstery. Saves Redecorating. Sells like wild. Agents! Rush name. Samples sent on trial.
KRISTEE CO., 668 Bar St., Akron, Ohio

FOLLOW THIS MAN

Secret Service Operator No. 38 is on the job! Running down dangerous Counterfeit Gang. Telltale finger prints in murdered girl's room.

Free *The Confidential Report Operator No. 38 made to his chief. Write for it.*

Earn a Regular Monthly Salary

YOU can become a Finger Print Expert at home, in your spare time, at small cost. Write for confidential full report and details. Literature will be sent only to persons stating their age.

INSTITUTE OF APPLIED SCIENCE
1920 Sunnyside Avenue
Dept. 7384 Chicago, Ill.

Choice of the LATEST STYLES—remarkably LOW PRICES. SATISFACTION GUARANTEED or your money back. If you are not satisfied—they will not cost you a cent.

SEND NO MONEY Write for FREE catalog today showing all of our many styles and LOW prices!

ADVANCE SPECTACLE CO. BROKEN GLASSES REPAIRED AT LOW COST!
537 S. Dearborn St. Dept. PP-4, Chicago, Ill.

The gunmen of the Old West were born in Missouri, on the Brazos River, and the Trinity. They came from log cabins in Wisconsin, and from sprawling 'dobe houses in the deep Southwest. One I knew even came from Chicago. He was a sure-thing card-shark, and he didn't live long after he began dealing stud.

All these fellows suffered from itching feet. They wanted to know what was on the other side of the hill. For the most part they were not only fiercely individualistic, but they were egoists.

I'd say, off-hand that the early-day gunman of the West was largely the result of the Civil War. Years of camp-life and legalized killing, without any sense of physical fear—and having little regard for the value of human life, discharged soldiers from both the North and the South flocked into the West.

That was the beginning of the "Gunfighter Era." The soldiers knew about revolvers—or they very soon learned. Life in the West was hard—a man's life. They had learned pugnacity during the campaigns. Now there were Indians to be fought. The war veterans fought them. Usually these men were uneducated. They didn't do a great deal of thinking about anything. They just acted on impulse, but usually they were big-hearted young devils. Boistrous and quarrelsome when they were drunk. . . .

A typical gunman of the old West is difficult to recreate. He varied so vastly in size, coloring, habits of thought, ideas about almost everything, and in general disposition. Some of them were not the "bravest men on earth;" a few of them never gave a tenderfoot a break, and some of the notches on their guns resulted from shooting amateurs and fool-hardy youngsters who didn't have much of an idea what it was all about. But, for the most part—except when they were simply crazy drunk, and, therefore, mentally ir-

responsible—they all displayed a bulldog courage. They had nerves of steel. They were deliberate, nonchalant—but they could move like streaks of light when occasion demanded. They were prestidigitators of hand-artillery superior to any which even a "Herman the Great" might have displayed. Surely they could demonstrate that "the hand *is* quicker than the eye." They could perform more tricks in the handling of a sixgun than ordinary men can learn in a lifetime—even if they seldom made use of them. But always they were "different" from their fellows.

Most of the latter cared only to work and to play, to earn money, and otherwise enjoy themselves. The gunmen of the old West—that is, most of them—had a somewhat different outlook on life. They were, generally speaking, loose morally; inclined to be selfish—often inordinately so.

But this, however, was not true of the gunmen whose *business* it was to kill; to protect law-abiding people from evildoers; officers of the law. These were not instinctive killers. They never pulled a gun except in the performance of their duty. But when they did—things happened.

In memory certain of the old-time gunmen stand out like light-houses on a dark night. Two kinds of gunmen—lawmen, and men who did not always obey the law—or even respect it.

There were Bill Longley, John Hardin, Jim Courtright, Ben Thompson, John Ringo, Sheriff Pat Garrett—God rest his soul! One of the bravest, and most conscientious and sincere, officers of the law I ever knew, or heard about; a brave soldier, and a patriot. He killed Billy the Kid, among many others.

Captain John Hughes, of the Texas Rangers—captain of D Company he was, from 1893 until 1915. Captain Bill McDonald, also of the Texas Rangers, Lee Christmas, and—perhaps the greatest of

Learn this Profitable Profession

in 90 Days at Home

Hundreds of men and women of all ages 18-50 make $10.00 to $20.00 in a single day giving scientific Swedish Massage and Hydro-Therapy treatments. There is a big demand from Hospitals, Sanitariums, Clubs, Doctors and private patients as well as opportunities for establishing your own office. Learn this interesting money-making profession in your own home by mail through our home study course. Same instructors as in our NATIONALLY KNOWN resident school. A diploma is awarded upon completion of the course. Course can be completed in 3 to 4 months. High School training is not necessary. Many earn big money while learning.

Anatomy Charts & Booklet FREE

Enroll now and we will include uniform coat, medical dictionary, patented reducing roller and Hydro-Therapy supplies without extra cost. The reducing course alone may be worth many times the modest tuition fee. Send coupon now for Anatomy Charts and booklet containing photographs and letters from successful graduates. These will all be sent postpaid—FREE.

THE College of Swedish Massage
(Successor to National College of Massage)
Dept. 495—30 E. Adams St., Chicago.
You may send me FREE and postpaid Anatomy Charts, booklet containing photographs and letters from graduates, and complete details of your offer.

Name .....
Address .....
City ..... State .....

don't WORRY

ABOUT **RUPTURE**

Why put up with years of needless discomfort and worry? Try a Brooks Automatic Air Cushion. This marvelous appliance permits the opening to close, yet holds reducible rupture securely, comfortably—day and night. Thousands report amazing results. Light, neat-fitting. No hard pads or stiff springs to chafe or gouge. Made for men, women and children. Durable, cheap, **Sent on trial** to prove it. Never sold in stores. Beware of imitations. Write for Free Book on Rupture, no-risk trial order plan, and proof of results. All correspondence confidential.
BROOKS COMPANY, 159-B State St., Marshall, Mich.

HOME-STUDY BRINGS BIGGER PAY

Don't be caught napping when Opportunity knocks. Prepare for advancement and more money by training *now* for the job ahead. *Free 48-Page Books Tell How.* Write for the book on the business field you like—or mail us this ad with your name and address in the margin. *Now*, please.

☐ Higher Accountancy	☐ Business Managem't
☐ Mod. Salesmanship	☐ Business Corres.
☐ Traffic Management	☐ Credit and Collection Correspondence
☐ Law: Degree of LL. B.	
☐ Commercial Law	☐ Mod. Foremanship
☐ Industrial Mgm't	☐ Expert Bookkeeping
☐ Stenotypy	☐ C. P. A. Coaching
☐ Railway Accounting	☐ Business English
	☐ Effective Speaking

LASALLE EXTENSION UNIVERSITY
A Correspondence Institution
Dept. 4334-R CHICAGO

Gas on Stomach
may excite the Heart

Gas trapped in the stomach or gullet may act like a hair-trigger on the heart action. At the first sign of distress smart men and women depend on Bell-ans Tablets to set gas free. No laxative but made of the fastest-acting medicines known for symptomatic relief of gastric hyperacidity. If the FIRST TRIAL doesn't prove Bell-ans better, return bottle to us and receive DOUBLE Money Back. 25c at all drug stores.

HAND COLORED In Oil PHOTO ENLARGEMENT

Beautifully mounted in 7 x 9 white frame mat. Made from any photograph, snapshot or negative. Original returned. Send 35c and stamp—no other charges.

COLORGRAPH, Dept. LM-22, 17 N. LeClaire, Chicago

35c PLUS 3c STAMP for Mailing

RUPTURED?
Get Relief This Proven Way

Why try to worry along with trusses that gouge your flesh—press heavily on hips and spine—enlarge opening—fail to hold rupture? You need the Cluthe. No leg-straps or cutting belts. Automatic adjustable pad holds at real opening—follows every body movement with instant increased support in case of strain. Cannot slip whether at work or play. Light. Waterproof. Can be worn in bath. Send for amazing FREE book "Advice To Ruptured" and details of liberal truthful 60-day trial offer. Also endorsements from grateful users in your neighborhood. Write: CLUTHE SONS, Dept. 15, Bloomfield, New Jersey

FALSE TEETH by MAIL! SEND NO MONEY!

WORLD'S LARGEST DENTAL PLATE MAKERS

Made for you on 60 DAYS' TRIAL

$7.95 to $35

MONEY BACK GUARANTEE of SATISFACTION. FREE impression material, directions, catalog. Write today.

U. S. DENTAL CO., 1555 Milwaukee Ave., Dept. 4-87, Chicago

SINUS HEAD COLDS CATARRH

TRY THIS FOR RELIEF OF THE NASAL CONGESTION

To ease such nasal congestion symptoms as sniffling, sneezing, hawking, stuffed-up feeling, watery eyes, roaring ears and pounding pressure, FLUSH the nasal passage with SINASIPTEC. Based on a physician's successful prescription. SINASIPTEC washes out thick, crusty, sticky, old mucous as it soothes and reduces swollen, irritated tissue.

Send Today for An Amazing 25c Test

Just mail 25c with name, address today for new special complete *Sinasiptec* and *Nasal Douche* package for thorough trial to American Drug Corp., Dept. D-13, 6060 Maple, St. Louis, Mo.

LEARN MONEY-MAKING CARTOONING

Same Simplified Method that has helped train creators of "Terry & Pirates," "Wash Tubbs," "Out Our Way," "Winnie Winkle," "Reg'lar Fellers," "Strange As it Seems," "Secret Agent X-9," and many others. Earn while learning. Rush 10c for Picture Chart (to test your ability), and full details. (State age)

THE LANDON SCHOOL, 4284 Nat'l Bldg., Cleveland, Ohio

Asthma Agony

Don't rely on smokes, sprays and injections if you suffer from terrible recurring, choking, gasping, wheezing spells of Asthma. Thousands of sufferers have found that the first dose of Mendaco usually palliates Asthma spasms and loosens thick strangling mucus, thus promoting freer breathing and more restful sleep. Get Mendaco in tasteless tablets from druggists. Only 60c. Money back guaranteed unless fully satisfied.

them all, in some ways—Christopher Columbus Pearson, famed sheriff of Rawlins County, Kansas, and the man who, single-handed, killed the three Berry boys on the McDonald ranch—as desperate, and as vicious, cattle rustlers and horse thieves as any country ever produced. . . .

I must tell you a story about "C. C." as he was called by hundreds of folks in Waco, Sherman, Thomas and Rawlins Counties, in Kansas, in the old days. He had been a cowpuncher when trail-drives from Texas came often to Hays City. Even before that. I think he came originally from Missouri. He was a slight man, with long mustaches. Easy-spoken, taciturn, but with a grin which would warm the cockles of the heart of any buzzard which ever stripped a cadaver. You know?

He had one blue and one black eye, and he wore his broad-brimmed slouch hat down over his left eye—the black one. He could shoot with either hand—and he could draw as quickly as a slippery-fingered poker-shark can flip an ace out of a cold deck. . . . Once, when he was riding for the Northwest Cattle Company, he met up with a bully who said he was "traveling for the Western Slaughter House" and was "looking for blood."

C. C. wasn't more than twenty or so, at the time. He was standing beside a wagon near the bunk house, waiting for the boss to come from the ranch house and give him instructions. The bully was a new man on the spread. He had been on a bat some place—probably in Atwood, and had just ridden to the ranch after several days absence. He had a hangover, and two six-guns in scabbards at his waist.

It had been rumored that this ranny—his name was Ted Shrively, I seem to remember, but it doesn't matter—had knocked off a couple of men over in Stratton, or some place. Anyway, he had the reputation of being a killer when he was drunk—as obviously he was now. He

never had liked C. C.—and had picked on him a lot. When Shrively rode up and tumbled out of his saddle he saw the young fellow with one blue and one black eye, and hailed him by asking whether anyone there knew who he was. C. C. shook his head, and said he reckoned he didn't. Then Shrively told him. "And so," he added, "I might as well start on you."

Pearson appeared a bit flabbergasted for a moment, but the others at the wagon saw him step away from the wagon-wheel a few feet and hoist his shoulders a few inches. The bully started toward him, one hand on the butt of a six-gun, at his hip. The youngster just stood there, his blue eye—the eye of a killer; funny thing about the eyes of a killer: no one ever saw a *black*-eyed gunman who really was a killer; always they have blue eyes—like icicles—on the oncoming bully. When Shrively had come within about thirty feet of where Chris stood, beside the wagon-wheel, he jerked his gun out of the scabbard and started to pull down. The kid always used a .38. There was a roar. The gun flew out of Shrively's hand as a bullet nicked the back of his hand. Then came another which chipped the bully on the left ear, puncturing it. A third bullet punctured his other ear. A fourth bullet cut a groove across his right cheek. A fifth snipped off a button on the bully's buffalo coat, as he whirled about. That's all the cartridges there had been in the kid's gun. A *real* gun-fighter never puts a cartridge into the chamber in which the hammer rests. He won't take a chance of an accident to himself.

"So," C. C. observed with a grin, "you are from the Western Slaughter House—and you're lookin' for blood! I reckon you come to the right place to get it—but you ain't payin' for it, on account of it's your own."

Shrively howled, and cursed with rage,

ONE INSURANCE POLICY PROTECTS YOUR ENTIRE FAMILY

(A typical Crown Family Group)

COSTS YOU ONLY $1 A MONTH FOR ALL

PARENTS, CHILDREN AND GRANDCHILDREN INCLUDED

Think of it... you can insure your entire family... ages 1 to 75... in this wonderful Life Insurance Policy. From babies to Grandparents! No Medical Examination.

PAYS UP TO $3000.00 MAXIMUM ★★★ TRIPLE BENEFITS

Every member of your family (up to 10 persons) can be protected under one big policy. This amazing policy pays for Natural or Ordinary Death, Auto Accident Death, or Travel Accident Death. Costs less than 3½¢ a day, not for each person, but for the ENTIRE family. Send coupon NOW for full details.

SEND NO MONEY — EXAMINE POLICY ON FREE OFFER

We desire to send you this fine Family Group Policy for 10 days. No obligation. No Agent Will Call. You can return the policy if not satisfied. The Crown Life Insurance Company is Safe and Reliable... has paid thousands and thousands in cash benefits to policy holders. Mail coupon NOW.

MAIL THIS FOR FREE POLICY INSPECTION OFFER

CROWN LIFE INSURANCE COMPANY
203 North Wabash Ave. Dept. 8, Chicago, Illinois

SEND NO MONEY
NO AGENT WILL CALL

Without cost or obligation, please rush 10 DAY FREE INSPECTION OFFER and details of Crown's Triple Benefit Family Group Life Insurance Policy.

NAME_____

ADDRESS_____

DRAFTING

BOOKS SENT FREE!
ON APPROVAL—6 VOLUMES
BRAND NEW EDITION

For Beginners or Experts

Written so you can understand every word, by well known engineers. De Luxe modernistic, washable cloth binding, over 1600 pages, hundreds of blueprints, charts and diagrams; prepares you for a good drafting job in mechanical lines. Sent for 10 days' free use if you mail coupon immediately.

Only 15 minutes a day with these WONDER BOOKS can prepare you for a good drafting job. Drafting from simple straight lines to important complex plans. A step at a time! Built especially for beginners, for men with only grammar schooling. Drafting room practice, PLUS ENGINEERING, made easy and clear. 400 pages on tool design, over 300 pages on machine design. Includes special volume on blueprint reading with *full size* actual production blueprints, some 20"x30", as well as question and answer sheets.

Big Field • Big Demand • Big Pay

Competent draftsmen are urgently needed in all manufacturing lines at $30.00 to $75.00 a week. That's just the beginning—FOR DRAFTSMEN HAVE GOOD CHANCES FOR ADVANCEMENT. Pleasant, fascinating work, easy to learn and do. Learn quickly with these books—send coupon for a set and see for yourself.

A year's consulting service now given to all buyers of this famous cyclopedia of drafting.

AMERICAN TECHNICAL SOCIETY
Publishers—Home Study Courses

American Technical Society, Dept. D431, Drexel at 58th St., Chicago, Ill.
Send for 10 days' trial, Brand New 6 volume set of "Drafting for Machine Trades." I will pay the delivery charges only. If I wish, I may return books in 10 days and owe you nothing, but if I decide to keep them, I will send $2.00 after 10 days, then only $3.00 a month until $19.80, the total price, is paid. Send Brand New edition and include Consulting Service Certificate.

Name.....

Address.....

Please attach letter stating age, occupation, employer's name and address and that of at least one business man as a reference.

BECOME AN EXPERT

ACCOUNTANT

Executive Accountants and C.P.A.'s earn $2,000 to $10,000 a year. Thousands of firms need them. About 20,000 Certified Public Accountants in the U. S. We train you thoroly at home in spare time for C.P.A. examinations or executive accounting positions. Previous experience unnecessary. Personal training under supervision of staff of C.P.A.'s, including members of the American Institute of Accountants. Write for free book, "Accountancy, the Profession That Pays."

LaSalle Extension University, Dept. 4334-H, Chicago
A Correspondence Institution

LOOK FOR THE WORDS
"ALL STORIES NEW—NO REPRINTS"
ON THE MAGAZINES YOU BUY!

THE PUBLISHERS OF THIS MAGAZINE ARE UNALTERABLY OPPOSED TO THE PRESENT-DAY CUSTOM OF REPRINTING OLD STORIES WHICH—*BECAUSE THEY HAVE BEEN PUBLISHED PREVIOUSLY*—CAN BE BOUGHT CHEAPLY!

Insure yourself full value in reading pleasure. . . .

Insist on a magazine which is plainly marked—

"ALL STORIES NEW—NO REPRINTS"

(SIDELINE Salesmen and Agents)

Sell our Illustrated Comic Booklets, and other novelties. Each booklet size 4¼ by 2¾. Ten different sample booklets sent for 50c or 25 assorted for $1.00 or 100 assorted for $2.00. Shipped prepaid. Wholesale novelty price list sent with order only. No C. O. D. orders. Send Cash, Stamps or Money-Order.

REPSAC SALES CO., 1 West 13 St., Dept. 1004, New York

CASH FOR UNUSED STAMPS

U. S. unused postage wanted at 90% face value for denominations ¼c to 10c, 85% face value for denominations 20c to 50c. Small lots 85% face value. MAIL STAMPS REGISTERED. Money sent by return mail.

GARBER SERVICE, 72 5th Ave., Dept. 1004, New York

ASTHMA

Symptoms Relieved. Write today for free information and special money back offer.

W. K. STERLINE 610 Ohio Ave. SIDNEY, OHIO

SEND NO MONEY!
16 DAYS' TRIAL

Newest Styles

GLASSES by MAIL

$2.95 & Up COMPLETE

We GUARANTEE SATISFACTION or Your Money Back! We also Repair BROKEN GLASSES.

U.S. FREE Catalog and information!
EYE-GLASSES CO., 1557 Milwaukee Av., Dept. 4-87, Chicago

FALSE TEETH

LOW AS $7.95

90 DAYS' TRIAL
TEST THEM
EXAMINE THEM

We make FALSE TEETH for you by mail from your own impressions. You have satisfaction of MONEY-BACK GUARANTEE. Customers in United States and Canada report satisfaction but you be your own judge.

SEND NO MONEY
WRITE TODAY for FREE BOOKLET and MATERIAL

CLEVELAND DENTAL SUPPLY COMPANY
Dept. 48-D2, East St. Louis, Illinois

STOP Itching
GET RELIEF This Fast Way —or Money Back

For quick relief from itching of eczema, pimples, athlete's foot, scales, scabies, rashes and other externally caused skin troubles, use world-famous, cooling, antiseptic, liquid D. D. D. Prescription. Greaseless, stainless. Soothes irritation and quickly stops the most intense itching. 35c trial bottle proves it, or money back. Ask your druggist today for D. D. D. PRESCRIPTION.

and barged into the bunkhouse near-by. That evening, when the men were going into the chuck shack for supper, Shrively appeared suddenly from somewhere, bandaged of head and hand, with a gun in his right hand. He shouted he was out to get the kid. Pearson leaned against the door-jam of the shack, and waited. When the bully started to throw down on him, C. C. pulled, and let him have it.

"Too bad I wasted them there bullets this mawnin'," C. C. observed as he broke his gun and blew the smoke out of the barrel. "I shore did hope he'd learn a lesson. But it 'pears as how he didn't. Now he cain't."

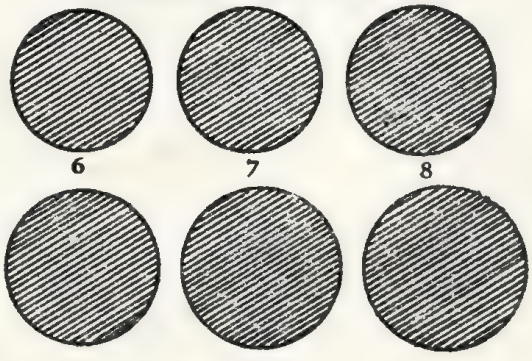
YOUR FRIENDS WILL WANT ONE TOO!
UNIQUE — HANDSOME — DIFFERENT

100% Sterling Silver

50c While They Last!

This massive sterling silver ring, with its raised signet replica of the American Longhorn Steer, can be bought *only* by the readers of a POPULAR PUBLICATIONS or FICTIONEERS Magazine!

The circles below are for your convenience in determining your ring size



Clip This Coupon and Mail Today!

POPULAR PUBLICATIONS, INC.
205 East 42nd Street, N. Y. C.
I would like to own the sterling silver "Longhorn" ring, illustrated above, for which I enclose (50c) in coin, stamps or money order.

.....
(Signature)

.....
(Street Address) (City)

.....
(State) (Ring Size) 5

THE AUGURIN' PEN

I never knew how many men Pearson killed, during his lifetime. I do know he never shot a man that didn't first try to kill him—or who refused to obey a command to surrender, when he was a law officer. They used to say in Atwood—when he was the sheriff of Rawlins County, and there wasn't anyone in the section who had the temerity to run against him—that "if the devil himself ever started anything with "C. C.", the kid sure would finish it!" . . . . Once I saw him, behind the court house in Atwood, when he shot the five spots out of the five of diamonds with one gun, at twenty paces, and the five spots out of the five of hearts, at the same distance—in exactly four seconds. Five of us held watches. Mine was a stop watch.

As square a guy as ever scratched leather. He'd give you his shirt if you needed it, and go bare-backed through a blizzard. And you didn't have to be a Pop, either!

Maybe Christopher Columbus Pearson was the "typical old-time Western gunman." He sure was hell on folks who "pesticated too much—and such."

That is what Congressman Charles Dewey, of Chicago—whose family owned the big Dewey ranch in Rawlins County—once said about him. And I believe it!

* * *

I HAVE received letters from Charles Mosier of Butte, Henry Carlisle of Omaha, James B. Sutherland of Detroit, Karl Goetch of Milwaukee, and Ronald Overholdt of Mason City, Iowa, asking me to tell them about certain of the "stunts" performed by old-time gunmen in the West. Mosier, who, I understand, is an old-time reporter on the Anaconda *Standard*, wants to know, particularly, whether there ever was such a thing as the "border shift"—by which a gunman

A KEY TO SHOP PRACTICE
For Every Machinist, Toolmaker, Machine Operator, Draughtsman, Metal Worker, Mechanic or Student. Covers Shop Practice in All Branches.

A READY REFERENCE
Tells How to Operate and Set Up Lathes, Screw and Milling Machines, Shapers, Drill Presses and All Machine Tools.

5 PRACTICAL BOOKS IN ONE!
60 FULLY ILLUSTRATED CHAPTERS
Covering: 1—Modern Machine Shop Practice. 2—Blue Print Reading and How to Draw. 3—Calculations & Mathematics for Machinists. 4—Shop Physics. 5—How to Use Slide Rule.

Get This Information for Yourself. Mail Coupon Today. No Obligation Unless Satisfied. ASK TO SEE IT.

1600 PAGES FULLY ILLUSTRATED $4 COMPLETE • PAY ONLY $1 MO.

THEO. AUDEL & CO., 49 WEST 23rd STREET, NEW YORK
Mail AUDELS MACHINISTS & TOOLMAKERS HANDY BOOK. Price $4 on 7 Days Free Trial. If O. K. I will remit $1 in 7 days and $1 monthly until $4 is paid. Otherwise I will return it.

Name_____
Address_____
Occupation_____
Reference_____ PER

High School Course at Home
Many Finish in 2 Years

Go as rapidly as your time and abilities permit. Course equivalent to resident school work—prepares for college entrance exams. Standard H.S. texts supplied. Diploma. Credit for H. S. subjects already completed. Single subjects if desired. High school education is very important for advancement in business and industry and socially. Don't be handicapped all your life. Be a High School graduate. Start your training now. Free Bulletin on request. No obligation.

American School, Dept. H449, Drexel at 58th, Chicago

MAKE MORE MONEY
Taking Orders For The NIMROD Line

Earn more every day in the year representing old established firm with a complete line of fast selling necessities: Shirts of all kinds, Ties, Underwear, Hosiery, Raincoats, Sweaters, Jackets, Pants, Belts, Breeches, Shoes, Slacks, Ensembles, Sport coats, Uniforms, etc. Every item guaranteed. Experience unnecessary. Write quick for FREE SALES EQUIPMENT
NIMROD COMPANY
4922-28M Lincoln Ave., Chicago, Ill.

CUT OUT AND MAIL THIS AD
FOR BIG $5 ASS'T FOODS & PRODUCTS FREE!

SEND NO MONEY!
Just cut out and mail this ad with your name and address for big $5.00 Assortment of full size packages of Foods, Groceries, Soaps, etc. — yours ABSOLUTELY FREE! Show products to friends, neighbors — earn big cash profits in full or spare time, taking orders for bargains in more than 200 home necessities. No experience needed. You don't pay us one cent. We supply everything — ABSOLUTELY FREE — to start you earning money including big $5.00 Assortment of actual Products and easy money-making plans. Cut this ad out NOW and mail it with your name and address for your big FREE Assortment.
ZANOL 5025 Monmouth Cincinnati, Ohio

Classified Advertising

Antiques—Indian Relics

Indian Relics, Coins, Curios. Catalog 5c. VERNON LEMLEY, OSBORNE, KANSAS.

Female Help Wanted

Earn to $16 weekly taking orders in home, 2 dresses for $3.98. Just one of 140 wonderful values. No investment. Give age, dress size. Fashion Frocks, Desk 34029, Cincinnati, O.

For Inventors

INVENTORS: — Foresighted manufacturers already planning post-war sale of new non-military products. If you have a useful invention, patented or unpatented, write Chartered Institute of American Inventors, Dept. 31, Washington, D. C.

Historical Fiction

THRILLING HISTORICAL FICTION at reduced prices. Catalogue 10c. Historical Novel Service, Middleville, N. Y.

Hotel Training

HOTELS Call for Trained Men and Women. Good pay. Learn at home. Write Lewis Hotel Training Schools, Room AH-7259, Washington, D. C.

Patent Attorneys

INVENTORS—Protect your idea with a Patent. Don't delay. Secure "Patent Guide"—Free. Preliminary information furnished without obligation. Write CLARENCE A. O'BRIEN, Registered Patent Attorney, 226-D Adams Building, Washington, D. C.

Photo Finishing

ROLLS DEVELOPED — 25c coin. Two 5 x 7 Double Weight Professional Enlargements, 8 Gloss Deckle Edge Prints. CLUB PHOTO SERVICE, Dept. 16, La Crosse, Wis.

Poems—Songwriters

SONGS — SONG POEMS WANTED. No charge for melodies. Free examination. Hollywood Recording Studios, 87D14 Preuss Sta., Los Angeles.

SONG POEMS WANTED. Free examination. Send poems. McNeil. Master of Music, 510-A South Alexandria. Los Angeles, Calif.

SONGWRITERS: Send poem for our offer and FREE Rhyming Dictionary. RICHARD BROTHERS, 30 Woods Building, Chicago.

Songwriters, Interesting Propositions. Write PARAMOUNT SONG-RECORDING STUDIO, L-68, Box 190, Hollywood, Calif.

SONGWRITERS—Write for free booklet. Profit Sharing Plan. Allied Songs, 7608 Reading, Cincinnati, Ohio.

SONGWRITERS! Poems wanted. FIVE STAR MUSIC MASTERS, 620 Beacon Building, Boston.

SONGWRITERS: Send poems for offer and FREE Rhyming Pamphlet. Phonograph records made. Vanderbilt Studios, Box 112-AK, Coney Island, N. Y.

transferred his weapon from one hand to the other—as, for instance, when his gun-hand has been hit by bullet. An interesting feat. . . .

★

WHEN the boss on this spread first asked me to do this job of talking about the West, I had a hunch there might be days when I would wish I were serving my fellowmen again as a peregrinating, bronc-stomper. Or something. But, really, I had not the remotest conception of the number of letters which would pour in on me from every part of the country. Nor the subjects of suggested augurments which would be made. Off-hand, and speaking by and large, I'd say I am kept almost as busy as a one-armed paper-hanger with the hives, writing letters and going through my notes, and otherwise seeking more specific knowledge of the West, both old and new.

All of which, however, provides me with a lot of real enjoyment—and greatly increases my realization of the fact that the American people are deeply interested in the region and the men and women who first developed that vast section of the United States without which there could be no such glorious country as this is—the West. And so, folks, "keep coming."

But I would have you remember, folks, that this department is written long before the magazine goes to press each month—which accounts for the fact that replies to your augurments seldom appear herein as soon as you might expect them.

If you want to air your views about any part of the West, or of Western life or people, here's the place to do it! . . . . And so, until next time, "Here's mud in your eye!"

OLD WRANGLER.

(Concluded from page 133)

rounded up the herd on a flat west of the jail.

The two big covered wagons rolled in. Twenty head of dead and dying cattle still lay in the street, but right there in front of the Lodge lay the thing which once had been Gaspar Dominee.

Somebody had brought McCrackin's horse back to him. He had mounted and was sitting there leaning forward in the saddle when Bud Jensen and his daughter swung in beside him.

"What are we goin' to do with 'em, Bill?"

Jensen nodded to a mob of disarmed men lined up against a wall. There was not a weapon in the entire lot.

"Jailhouse with 'em!" ordered McCrackin. "There was decent folks here before they came, an' some of them decent folks are shore to be left. They'll know what to do, once we have time to find out. We'll just hold 'em until they decide."

"But—but what happened to the sheriff and Dominee?" demanded the girl.

"The sheriff," McCrackin frowned, "sorter got over-curious. He fell through a window an' broke his neck. With Mr. Dominee it was some different."

He glanced at the flattened thing in front of the Red Lode, and knew that the girl had not yet recognized it as something that had once been a man. "He musta took a runnin' fit to leave the country fast like Sandy Brown did when I told Sandy he could go at the last minute. This is once more free cow range. Gimme a chaw of tobacco, Bud. Danged'f I ain't plumb fresh out agin!"

THE END

★ ★

More Opportunity for You!

BE AN ARTIST

Start Training at Home NOW for Successful, Lasting Career in

COMMERCIAL ART ILLUSTRATING CARTOONING

Trained Artists are capable of earning $30, $50, $75 a week! Once you develop your Art ability you are on the road to good pay and happiness. Newspapers, magazines, stores, theatres, printers, etc.—all offer commercial opportunities to men and women with Art training and ability. Now is the time to prepare. Our proven study method has been famous since 1914. TWO ART OUTFITS with course. Write for FREE BOOK—tells about opportunities for YOU in this profitable field.

FREE BOOK gives details!

Washington School of Art, Studio 994A
1115—15th St., N.W., Washington, D. C.

I am interested in learning to draw. Please send me your FREE, colorful catalog, "Art for Pleasure and Profit."

Name ..... Age.....
Address .....
City ..... State.....

ANY PHOTO ENLARGED 47¢

Size 8x10 inches. Original returned safely. Send No Money. Just mail photo, snapshot or negative—receive promptly handsome Enlargement. Pay postman only 47c plus postage. Standard Art Studios, Dept. 882-D, 113 S. Jefferson, Chicago

3 for $1.00

MAN WANTED

BUILD A BIG PAY ROUTE

SELL TO STORES ON NEW PLAN

Carry a complete "Wholesale Supply House" in your hand. Let us start you making Big Money in permanent business of your own. Show Storekeepers in every business how to DOUBLE profits on Nationally Advertised Goods. Over 200 Products. No experience needed. Free Book gives amazing facts. Write today. World's Products Co., Dept. 694, Spencer, Ind.

FALSE TEETH Low as $6.85

90 DAYS TRIAL
TEST THEM
EXAMINE THEM

We make FALSE TEETH for you BY MAIL from your mouth-impression! Money-Back GUARANTEE of Satisfaction. FREE impression material, directions. Booklet of New Styles and Information. Write today to PARKER DENTAL LAB.,

FREE

SEND NO MONEY

127 N. DEARBORN ST., DEPT. 26C, CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

15 DAYS TRIAL

SPECTACLES from $1.95

100% MONEY BACK GUARANTEE

Mail your name and address to HOME SERVICE SPECTACLE COMPANY, and YOU WILL RECEIVE WITHOUT OBLIGATION circulars showing latest style spectacles at lowest prices FREE. Or send 25c and we will mail to you a set of lenses to assist you in the selection of glasses. NOTHING MORE TO PAY UNTIL YOU ARE FULLY SATISFIED. We handle only HIGH GRADE LENSES. Our Doctor, with many years of experience, GUARANTEES 100% SATISFACTION OR NO COST TO YOU.

WE DUPLICATE and REPAIR BROKEN SPECTACLES AT GREAT SAVINGS

Home Service Spectacle Co., Dept. P-11
1011 Chestnut Street Philadelphia, Pa.

"THE RUDDER'S GONE, SIR!"

● **Fateful moment — when a ship loses its rudder! Then a great hulk drifts helplessly — and unless aid comes, that ship goes "on the rocks."**

There are *men* who drift all their lives. Is it surprising that these rudderless souls end up "on the rocks"?

I. C. S. students are men who fashion their own "rudders" — out of common sense, determination, and *sound, essential training!* If *you* want to come into the Port of Prosperity and Security, then *you* must get the training you need. Get it "the I. C. S. way" — from textbooks that have been adopted by 25 State Universities — through methods that are *individualized* to fit your own *personal* requirements. Send the coupon — *today* — for complete information.

INTERNATIONAL CORRESPONDENCE SCHOOLS

HELPING TO TRAIN AMERICANS FOR VICTORY

LET'S GO! U.S.A. · KEEP 'EM FLYING!

BOX 3280-J, SCRANTON, PENNA.

Without cost or obligation, please send me a copy of your booklet, "Who Wins and Why," and full particulars about the course *before* which I have marked X:

TECHNICAL AND INDUSTRIAL COURSES

☐ Air Brake
☐ Air Conditioning
☐ Airplane Drafting
☐ Architectural Drafting
☐ Architecture
☐ Auto Engine Tune-up
☐ Auto Technician
☐ Aviation ☐ Aviation Mechanic
☐ Boilermaking
☐ Bridge Engineering
☐ Chemistry
☐ Civil Engineering
☐ Coal Mining
☐ Concrete Engineering
☐ Contracting and Building
☐ Cotton Manufacturing
☐ Diesel Engines
☐ Electrical Drafting
☐ Electrical Engineering
☐ Electric Lighting
☐ Foundryman ☐ Heating
☐ Heat Treatment of Metals
☐ Highway Engineering
☐ House Planning
☐ Industrial Metallurgy
☐ Locomotive Engineer
☐ Machinist
☐ Management of Inventions
☐ Marine Engines
☐ Mechanical Drafting
☐ Mechanical Engineering
☐ Mine Foreman
☐ Navigation
☐ Patternmaking ☐ Plumbing
☐ Practical Telephony
☐ Public Works Engineering
☐ Pulp and Paper Making
☐ Radio, General
☐ Radio Operating
☐ Radio Servicing
☐ R. R. Section Foreman
☐ R. R. Signalman ☐ Refrigeration
☐ Sanitary Engineering
☐ Sheet Metal Work
☐ Ship Drafting
☐ Shipfitting ☐ Shop Practice
☐ Steam Electric ☐ Steam Engines
☐ Steam Fitting
☐ Structural Drafting
☐ Structural Engineering
☐ Surveying and Mapping
☐ Telegraph Engineering
☐ Telephone Work
☐ Textile Designing
☐ Toolmaking ☐ Welding
☐ Woolen Manufacturing

BUSINESS COURSES

☐ Accounting ☐ Advertising
☐ Bookkeeping
☐ Business Correspondence
☐ Business Management
☐ Cartooning ☐ Civil Service
☐ College Preparatory
☐ Commercial
☐ Commercial Illustrating
☐ Cost Accounting
☐ C. P. Accounting
☐ First Year College
☐ Foremanship ☐ French
☐ Good English
☐ High School
☐ Managing Men at Work
☐ Railway Postal Clerk
☐ Salesmanship
☐ Secretarial ☐ Spanish
☐ Showcard and Sign Lettering
☐ Traffic Management

HOME ECONOMICS COURSES

☐ Advanced Dressmaking
☐ Foods and Cookery
☐ Home Dressmaking
☐ Professional Dressmaking and Designing
☐ Tea Room and Cafeteria Management, Catering

Name.....*Age*.....*Address*.....

City.....*State*.....*Present Position*.....

Canadian residents send coupon to International Correspondence Schools Canadian, Limited, Montreal, Canada
British residents send coupon to I. C. S., 71 Kingsway, London, W. C. 2, England

Less than MFRS. ORIG. 1/2 PRICE

GENUINE Late Model No. 8

L.C.SMITH

was $102.50

NOW $37.85 CASH

Completely Reconditioned and Fully Guaranteed

While 297 Last!

No Extra Charge -- 14" Models

Special price. Same as machine shown but equipped with 14 inch carriage. Beautifully refinished and unconditional 2 year guarantee.

only **70¢** *a week*

NO MONEY DOWN

10 DAYS TRIAL

Easy Terms—10c a day

No obligation to buy. Send no money. See before you buy on wide-open 10 day Trial. Pay on easiest terms—only 10c a day. You get this genuine late office model L. C. Smith beautifully reconditioned with all standard improvements—basket shift, standard 84 character, 4-row keyboard, shift lock key, back spacer, 2 color ribbon, ribbon reverse, stencil cutting device, tabulator, etc. Ball bearing throughout—quiet operation. THOUSANDS PAID $102.50—IT'S YOURS FOR ONLY $37.85 (CASH PRICE). No risk, money back guarantee!

2 YEAR GUARANTEE

Our 2 year ironclad guarantee is your assurance of satisfaction and long service. *You must be satisfied that this is the biggest, best typewriter bargain ever offered!* Our 30 years of Fair Dealing Backs Up This Guarantee.

NO EXTRA CHARGE! 14 INCH CARRIAGES

The L. C. Smith with basket shift is the machine used by schools, large corporations, and business houses the country over. A perfect typewriter for office work, correspondence, manifold work, etc. The wide carriage model contains all modern improvements same as the regular carriage (illustrated), **but takes paper 14 inches wide and has a writing line of 12 inches.** This is the machine you need for making government reports using large office forms, billing, etc. **It can be yours at No Extra Cost for a limited time**—only $37.85 cash—an extremely low price for a wide carriage machine—or buy on easy terms of $3.00 a month—less than the cost of renting an inferior machine!

INTERNATIONAL TYPEWRITER EXCHANGE
231 West Monroe Street Dept. 439 Chicago, Ill.

EXTRA VALUE

ROLL-A-WAY SECRETARIAL TYPEWRITER STAND

For those who have no typewriter stand or handy place to use a machine I make this special offer. This attractive stand that ordinarily sells for $4.85 can be yours with L. C. Smith for only $3.50 extra—payable 25c a month. Quality built. Just note all its convenient features. (See Coupon.)

Mounted on casters, can be moved by touch of finger.

Big working surface, all metal, compact, strong, attractive Two wings, correct working height.

FREE

COMPLETE TOUCH TYPING COURSE

We give FREE with your L. C. Smith a complete 9 lesson Home Study course of Famous Van Sant Touch Typing system. You can now learn typing quickly and easily.

OFFER FOR LIMITED TIME---SEND COUPON TODAY

Accept this wide open offer now. Send no money. Use L. C. Smith for 10 days trial in your home. Return it if you don't think it the greatest value you have ever seen. If you buy, pay on easiest terms—only $3.00 a month. 2 yr. ironclad guarantee.

MAIL this COUPON

INTERNATIONAL TYPEWRITER EXCHANGE, Dept. 439,
231 W. Monroe St., Chicago, Ill.

Send me L. C. Smith (F.O.B. Chicago) for 10 days' trial. If I keep it I will pay $3.00 per month until easy term price ($41.85) is paid. If I am not satisfied, I can return it express collect.

☐ 10" carriage ☐ 14" carriage (No Extra Charge)

☐ Check for typewriter stand ($3.50 extra—payable 25c a month). Stand sent on receipt of first payment on L. C. Smith.

Name..... Age.....

Typewritten signatures not acceptable.

Address .....

City..... State.....

CAUTION FOR QUICK SHIPMENT GIVE OCCUPATION AND REFERENCE

OVER 200,000 SATISFIED CUSTOMERS ALL OVER THE WORLD

AMAZING NEW LOW COST SICKNESS AND ACCIDENT POLICY INSURES YOUR WHOLE FAMILY

William Lindbloom and his family of Chicago, Ill., are protected by one of the new "United" Family Group Sickness and Accident Policies. You, too, should protect your family. Send coupon today.

Accidents are more common than you think.

ONLY $1 FOR ALL

Now, we offer for your whole family, this amazing, new "United" Family Group Sickness and Accident Policy. You may include each and every member of your family in one application—mother, father, children and even grandparents for the startling low cost of only $1.00 a month for the whole family. Don't wait—send the coupon today.

Sickness may strike without warning.

$7,500.00

ACCUMULATED CASH for Stated Accidental Death

4,080 people are disabled every hour, day and night.

Do not confuse this policy with so-called family group life policies where the entire family must die to collect maximum cash benefits. No one in your family has to die to get cash benefits from our Family Group Sickness and Accident Policy.

This wonderful, new kind of Insurance Policy pays cash benefits for any accidental death to any member of the family. It pays the applicant $25.00 weekly indemnity for SICKNESS or ACCIDENT — $25.00 weekly for HOSPITAL — and $100.00 EMERGENCY allowance and many other liberal features all as provided for in this remarkable Policy. Get a policy on our Free Inspection Offer and see for yourself that this is the best insurance, at such a low cost, that any company has dared to offer.

The United Insurance Company of Chicago is a Legal Reserve (not an assessment) Insurance Company, old and reliable. Millions already paid in claims to policyholders. $225,000.00 on deposit with Illinois Insurance Department for your protection.

This can happen to you.

NO MEDICAL EXAMINATION FOR ANYONE

Each and every member of your family may be insured and there is no medical examination required for anyone. Remember, in addition to the liberal accident features the "Family" Policy covers SICKNESS as well—it provides many other liberal benefits, all as plainly stated in the policy. This vital protection gives "United" policyholders a safeguard against the misery of lost income and increased expenses during times of adversity.

Send No Money

JUST MAIL COUPON

You do not send one cent—just mail the coupon for our Free Inspection Offer. There is no obligation. Read the Policy in your own home and if you do not agree that it is the best Family Group Sickness and Accident Policy for your entire family then send it back. Don't delay until it is too late. Be prepared—get your "United" Family Policy today

FREE INSPECTION OFFER

to readers of this magazine

Take advantage of this unusual opportunity to provide for the security of your family. Send the coupon today for complete information and our Free Inspection Offer. Get the facts without obligation. Mail the coupon today—Now!

MAIL THIS COUPON TODAY

United Insurance Co.
Elgin Tower, Suite G-40-L
Elgin, Illinois.

NO AGENT WILL CALL

Please mail me at once complete information and Free Inspection Offer of the "United" Family Group Sickness and Accident Policy. Send No Money.

Name _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____